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THE KING'S SCOUTS

"THE THREE LADS SAT UP, AND FOUND THEMSELVES MOORED TO THE BANK BY THE STALWART ARM OF A REDSKIN."

THE KING'S SCOUTS

By

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With illustrations by Wal Paget

TORONTO

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THE KING'S SCOUTS

CHAPTER I

IN WHICH A MYSTERIOUS DRAWER IS OPENED

THE sun rose clear and bright upon the stately city of Quebec one cool spring morning in the year 1692. In the Lower Town the houses stood huddled together on the narrow strip of land between the river side and the huge rock that constituted the city's strength and defence. The smoke from the chimneys rose lazily in the clear, crisp air, then, when the upper currents were reached, it was blown off across the sparkling bosom of the St. Lawrence, melting into nothingness before the force of the cold northern breezes. Above in the Upper Town the sunlight flooded everything, tipping with gold the spire of the Cathedral and caressing with its warm touch the flag of France that floated bravely from its staff on the Chateau St. Louis. Fair indeed was the sight of this impregnable fortress that stood at the gateway of New France, and guarded the vast dominion of the French king Louis that stretched to the north and west for an unknown number of leagues. Below the city in the watery basin lay the King's ship but lately arrived bringing fresh colonists and soldiers for the peopling and protection of this vast new realm. Already was it laden for the return voyage, and as it floated lightly upon the tide it seemed like some great, white-winged bird pluming itself for flight to the home land.

Many of the inhabitants of the Lower Town had deserted their homes and ascended the steep street to witness the sights of the citadel. Here in the open square, the Place d'Armes, used as a parade ground by the garrison, was

collected a motley crowd—shopkeepers, labourers, *censitaires* from the outlying farms, women with children in their arms, an occasional friendly Indian wrapped silently in his blanket, trappers (*coureurs-de-bois* they were called) with their fur caps and weather-beaten faces, sailors from the King's ship—in fact representatives from all the various classes of inhabitants of this new, strange region. The cause of their curiosity was to be seen in the middle of the square. Here in full uniforms, led by a spirited band, marched and countermarched the entire military force of the Fort increased by the reinforcements but recently arrived. It was indeed a brave sight and one well calculated to attract the attention and stir the blood of the onlookers. The sharp word of command of the officers, the rattle of arms as the various movements of the drill were executed with wonderful precision, the thud of feet as the gallant men advanced at the double quick in line or broken up into detached groups—all served to arouse in the mind the recollection of the military glory of the nation and the need for these strong defenders of the Colony against its manifold dangers and ferocious foes.

A little in front of the crowd, on one side of the square, stood three lads intensely interested in the warlike manœuvres taking place before them. Inasmuch as they are destined to be the chief actors in the stirring events which follow, a word of description and identification may not be amiss.

The eldest was a boy of about nineteen, tall and lithe of figure and straight as one of the stately pines that covered the hillsides of this northern land. He was the son of a farmer living near Quebec, and his name was François Ledun. The other two, although wearing a similar dress and showing by their tanned skin and stalwart forms that they had lived the same outdoor life as their companion, seemed to be cast in a more refined mold. A strong family resemblance proclaimed them to be brothers. The older of the two, Pierre Bordeleau by name, was fully two years younger than François, while his brother Jean, the youngest of the group, was not yet fourteen. It was evident by the air of good fellowship that pervaded all their intercourse with one another that they were closely bound

by ties of rare friendliness. The fact that Jean leaned his arm on his brother's shoulder in affectionate familiarity betrayed their close relationship, had there been no similarity of features existing.

At length the drill was over and the soldiers marched away to their quarters. The assembled crowd dispersed in various directions and the three boys walked away together engaged in animated conversation.

"They are a brave lot," exclaimed François. "I only wish His Majesty would send us ten thousand more like them. Then we would keep the Indians in check and be prepared for any attack the English might choose to make."

"Eighty seems a small number for the King to send when the Governor had asked for a thousand," was Pierre's complaint.

"But eighty is better than none," was Jean's cheerful answer. "If they are made of the right stuff, as I think they are, a good deal can be accomplished with that small number." Then he added with a laugh, "It was easy to pick out the new arrivals by the cleanness of their uniforms and the whiteness of their skin. One expedition to the wilds will cause them to loose both."

By this time they had reached their home, a large, sombre-looking dwelling situated on one of the main streets of the Upper Town. They entered the large downstairs room, and by so doing interrupted the conversation of two men seated before the big, open fire. The boys gathered about the cheerful blaze, for the outside air was still chill with memories of the long winter just passed, and stood silently warming their hands and feet. The two men were Pierre's and Jean's father and maternal uncle. The latter, Jacques Ormesson, was a bluff, hearty, whole-souled trader whose eyes gleamed with affection as they rested on the lads. The former was a delicate-looking man, who seemed to have just recovered from some severe illness, judging by the pallor of his face and a general emaciated look. After the stir occasioned by the lads' entrance had subsided, the conversation was resumed.

"It is a bad business," began the father of the two boys, "this thing of having the streams free from ice and

the whole fleet of canoes laden with the entire winter's catch kept at Michilimackinac for fear of the savages who have taken possession of the Ottawa ready to capture the men and pelts, should they be rash enough to attempt to force a passage. The Colony will have its best trade ruined if matters are not remedied. Had the King sent the thousand men Frontenac requested, we would not thus be at the redskins' mercy."

"True," replied Jacques Ormesson, "but the brave Governor is not discouraged even now. I hear he is to send a party to try and break through the Indian lines and act as guard to bring the fleet home."

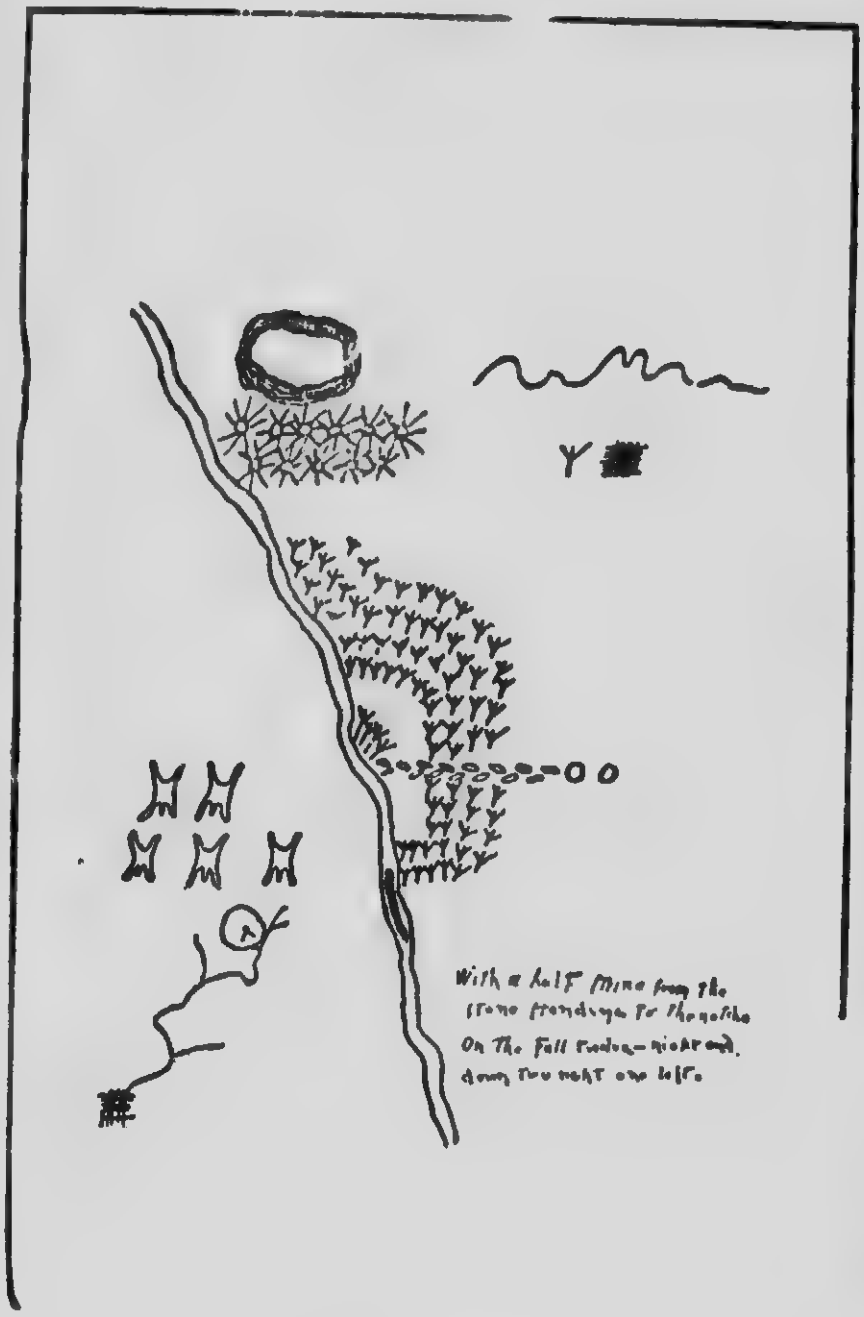
There was silence for a moment, then Pierre's father spoke thoughtfully:

"Strange, very strange it is that in searching through my brother's effects there should be no record of the cargo of skins that was shipped to him three years ago from the Great Lakes. It started but never arrived. If we had these on hand for shipment to France, it would make a vast deal of difference in the family treasury. His death has put this valuable asset out of our reach, I fear."

"Have you searched everywhere?" was Ormesson's inquiry.

"Yes, and without avail. There is but a single chance left that has just occurred to me. One drawer in his desk here cannot be opened. The lock is of a peculiar make so that it is impossible to force or pick it. If the key is not found, it will be necessary to destroy the desk in order to discover what the drawer contains. I dislike adopting such radical measures, however, as it is a highly useful and costly piece of furniture."

The two men arose, and approaching the desk examined carefully the lock that had so far bid defiance to all their efforts. They were startled while thus engaged by an exclamation of astonishment from Jean. While standing on the hearth before the fire, he noticed that one of the bricks on which he rested moved slightly beneath his foot. Stooping down, his curiosity aroused, he inspected the brick and found that it was indeed loose, while all of its fellows were tightly bound together by the intervening mortar. After a few unsuccessful efforts he managed to


With a half mine from the
stone standing to the north
On the fall trading—right and
down two right one left.

pry up one end of it with his hunting knife, and an instant later removed it from its place. Peering into the hole thus made he was astonished to see a key of curious form lying at the bottom. Seizing it he ran to his father crying: "I have found it." Then insisting that he be allowed to open the drawer himself, he inserted it in the lock. It turned easily but the drawer still stuck fast. Irritated by its obstinacy he gave an extra hard pull and it came out but so suddenly that he fell backwards to the floor, his heels in the air and the drawer on top of him. This feat was greeted by a shout of laughter from the other two boys, who hastened to relieve him from his predicament.

All five now crowded eagerly about the drawer, only to find it empty. A half audible sigh of disappointment arose on all sides. Pierre, after eyeing it carefully a moment, hastily pulled another from the desk, and placing it alongside pointed out the fact that the first was fully four inches shorter than the other.

"A secret hiding place!" exclaimed Ormesson, as he plunged his arm into the space where the drawer had been. After much straining and reaching, his fingers closed upon something which, when brought to the light, proved to be a small, carved, metal box four by five inches in size. It had no lock and its single fastening was quickly forced, disclosing the contents to the curious gaze of the group. What they beheld was only a sheet of oiled silk carefully folded to fit the box. This was quickly spread out upon the table and the eyes of all sought eagerly to learn its secret. Imagine their surprise on finding no writing of any kind on it, but merely a blank surface. The boys' father uttered an exclamation of anger, and with a quick movement seized the offending bit of silk, crumpled it in his hands and hurled it into the fire. Ormesson with a cry of alarm leaped to its rescue, but not before one corner had been badly scorched.

"Do nothing rash," he said, in a warning tone. "It must have some value else it would not have been so strangely preserved." With this he carefully spread it out again. To the amazement of all they beheld near the burnt corner which was still hot, the words "to the notch" staring them in the face, where previously every one would

have sworn there had been nothing. To add to the mystery, the writing began to fade as they gazed upon it, and a moment later disappeared entirely. The boys looked at one another as though wondering if they were really wide awake. Ormesson, however, enjoying their mystification, smiled and, beckoning them to come near him stepped to the fireplace and held the mysterious sheet before the blaze. Nothing happened for a moment, then as the silk became thoroughly heated, faint outlines appeared, and words, until finally it gave up its secret message.

Before anyone could speak, a loud knock was heard at the street door, and a soldier soon appeared before them. Bowing to the men he pointed to the three lads. "His Excellency, the Governor, wishes your immediate presence at the Chateau. The business brooks no delay." The boys with true military obedience left their interesting occupation and hurried away. A few minutes later they stood in the anteroom at the Château St. Louis awaiting their summons into the Governor's private apartment.

CHAPTER II

CONTAINS A CALL TO ARMS AND AN ACCOUNT OF A MIDNIGHT VISITOR

As the three lads waited, the mind of each was filled with thoughts aroused by his surroundings. It was two years since they had been in that same room on the memorable day when Pierre and Jean had been taken before the Governor to relate all they had learned concerning the treasonable plans of their father's brother, whose tragic end shortly afterwards made a deep impression on their youthful natures. François mentally reviewed the day of the attack on Quebec and recalled with satisfaction the reward he had received, a reward that enabled him to pay for a goodly farm, thus changing his father's estate from that of a renter to a landowner. Pierre's reveries were of a military character. He recalled his portion of the Governor's bounty, too, the appointment of the three as scouts attached to the service of the King with regular pay, and under the Governor's direct supervision and authority. There had been no call for their services, however, during the past two years. The boys had spent this time in attending a small school in the district, and using their vacations in hunting or trapping expeditions, at no time going very far away from Quebec. Pierre secretly hoped that this summons of the Governor meant that they were at last to take the field. Jean's memory went back to these same adventurous times, but they dwelt with affectionate tenderness on the recovery of their father from the hands of the Indians, and the discovery in the person of the kindly trader Ormesson a blood relation.

Their trains of thought were interrupted ere long and

they found themselves standing in the presence of the famous Frontenac, Governor of New France, the head of the Colony and the representative of the King. The great man gree ed them in a kindly manner.

"Well, young gentlemen," he began in a deeply vibrating voice, "your prompt response to my call shows that you possess the greatest of soldierly virtues—obedience. Let me see, it is two years since you received your appointment as King's scouts. You have drawn your pay regularly since that time, I believe." Here he frowned heavily, although there was a mischievous twinkle in his eye. "What have you been doing to earn it?"

The three boys were surprised at his seeming sternness. François was the first to reply.

"We have been ready, awaiting your Excellency's orders."

"Nor have we been idle," added Pierre, "but have been perfecting our knowledge of woodcraft so that we could render better services when we were finally called upon."

The Governor's frown relaxed. He turned toward Jean with a look of inquiry as though he said: "Well, sir, and what have you to say for yourself?"

Jean was a little abashed at the look but managed to stammer:

"In addition, your Excellency, I—I have been growing. I am two years older, a lot stronger and an inch-and-a-half taller."

Frontenac burst into a hearty laugh.

"My faith!" he cried, "that was a clever speech. He has been growing!" and again he leaned back in his chair while his whole frame shook with merriment. When this subsided, he added in his usual kindly tone: "You have all done well. I acquit you of any charge of rendering no return for your pay. But now, you will be called upon for something a little more definite. An expedition starts to-morrow to break the Indian blockade on the Ottawa and escort the fleet of canoes now held at Michilimackinac to Montreal. You will attach yourselves to this party, rendering such services as may be in your power to the commander Dorvilliers. Report at the Fort at eight to-morrow morning. The expedition leaves at nine."

The boys bowed in acquiescence to his order but were unable to repress a look of eagerness and delight at being once more actively engaged in the King's service. Frontenac noticed this look and smiled approvingly as he dismissed them with a hearty hand shake.

"Would your Excellency permit us to absent ourselves for a brief period after the work of the expedition is accomplished?" Pierre asked as they were leaving the room.

"*Certainement!*" was the quick response. "If you succeed in bringing through the fleet in safety, you may have a leave of absence of three months if necessary. I will speak to Dorvilliers in regard to the matter."

On the way home Jean inquired the reason of his brother's request.

"I am determined that we shall find the store of furs that our uncle has hidden away somewhere in the region whither we are going," was Pierre's determined reply. "Father and Uncle Ormesson have been greatly worried of late and I fear some impending financial disaster. Could we but discover and bring home the lost skins, I think all their anxiety would be at an end. I believe the mysterious drawing found this morning is the key to the whereabouts of this property. Let us hasten our steps and see if any progress has been made in deciphering it."

They found the trader and his companion engaged in making a careful copy of the strange drawing. The news of the proposed expedition caused this to be laid aside. Francois took his leave in a few minutes in order that he might bid farewell to his father, promising to meet his friends again at the hour set for embarkation. The four ate their midday meal in silence, the boys' thoughts eagerly engaged in foretasting the pleasures and excitement of their trip; the elders grave with the realization of the dangers that the restless youths were about to encounter.

"Life seems to be made up of meetings and separations," sighed the father, as they were once more gathered about the fireplace.

"True," replied Ormesson, with forced cheerfulness, "but our boys have their lives to live. In this new land they are perforce adventurous ones. *Le bon Dieu* who has

so graciously manifested His care over us all in the past will not desert us now in our need, but will bring them back in safety, covered with distinction for work well done."

"Amen!" was the father's rejoinder in a subdued tone, as he drew Jean closer to him and held him in a loving embrace. "But notwithstanding our faith in *Le bon Dieu*, the parting is grievous."

"We will do our best," said Jean bravely. "Who knows what services to the King we shall be able to render that will make you both proud of us on our return."

"I am determined that we shall not come back with empty hands, either," added Pierre boldly. "I shall take a copy of the strange drawing with me. It will be odd indeed if between us three we do not solve the mystery, and, if the skins are still in their hiding place, bring them home with us."

"Bravely spoken!" cried Ormesson delighted at the lad's resolute tone. "If you succeed, it will lift a heavy burden from this house."

A long silence ensued, each one busied with his own thoughts of the coming separation and unknown trials, a silence that was more eloquent than words when participated in by those bound closely to one another by the sacred ties of blood and affection. At length the trader stirred, and rose.

"Come, Pierre and Jean," he exclaimed in a cheery voice, "the time is short and call for action rather than fears and forebodings. Let us go to the shop and see if we cannot find something that will prove of service on your journey. New blankets will be necessary, while a few knives, powder horns and bullet pouches, I know, will not come amiss."

The boys obeyed with alacrity, and soon were looking over Ormesson's stock-in-trade, selecting such articles as they thought would be useful on the wilderness expedition. Later on they returned with their new possessions, and the remainder of the afternoon was spent in cleaning the guns and getting everything in order for the morrow. Their father and Ormesson were not idle on their part, but completed the task of copying the mystic document.

When evening came they all gathered about a table on

which this copy was carefully spread, to discover, if possible, some clue to its meaning.

"These figures to the left represent five beaver skins," said the boys' father. "That much is plain, for there were five hundred skins in the lost shipment."

"Good!" exclaimed Ormesson. "Here at the top is the picture of a large island. That must refer to Michilimackinac, the starting place. Beneath it are eleven suns. If I know anything about Indian picture-writing, I would hazard a guess that the place of concealment is eleven days' journey from that island."

"This large river must be the Ottawa," suggested Jean.

"Probably, but not necessarily," was Ormesson's thoughtful answer. "It may be one of its larger tributaries."

"It must be large enough to contain this island," commented Pierre, as he placed his finger on a spot half-way down the drawing. The trader nodded and was about to speak when he was interrupted by a shriek of terror from Jean who, pointing to the uncurtained window near which they stood, exclaimed:

"A face! Some one is watching us!"

His father ran to the window, opened it and looked out, but saw no one. At the same instant Ormesson and Pierre hurried to the door, and each taking a different direction ran around the house, but without result. They then parted, one running up the street, the other down, for some distance, but returned in a few minutes, panting from their exertions, but unsuccessful. The sky was deeply overcast, while a mist hung over the river and the Lower Town, making it difficult to discern a figure the size of a man more than a few paces off.

Upon their return Jean was closely questioned concerning the reality of what he thought he had seen.

"I could not have been mistaken," he maintained stoutly. "It was a human face, more like that of an Indian than a Frenchman, that was eagerly watching us. It was no friend either, for it scowled fiercely when I screamed."

The appearance of this strange night visitor seemed to cast a chill of foreboding upon the little company.

Ormesson folded up the copy they had been studying and handed it to Pierre.

"Place this in that oilskin belt I gave you to wear about your waist. Preserve it carefully and it may be of service to you all."

Pierre's father placed the original document in its box and laid it in a drawer of the desk without locking it. After a half-hour of desultory conversation, all four retired to rest, the boys wearied with the excitement of the day, their elders filled with a strange anxiety.

Soon silence reigned over the whole household. Pierre and Jean were fast asleep within five minutes. Ormesson tossed uneasily in fitful dozes as the night wore on. The boys' father, after pacing the floor of his room for an hour, threw himself upon his bed fully dressed, but not to sleep. A dread of some impending danger, together with grief at the thought of the parting next day, kept him wide awake. The great clock of the Château tolled the hour of two. The scurrying of rats in the wall startled him. The baying of a dog in the Lower Town smote upon his ears. Suddenly he started up. A slight noise in the room below alarmed him. Rising noiselessly and slipping off his boots, he seized a sword and hastily passed to the head of the stairs. Another sound as of some one moving about in the big room reached him. He descended the stairs rapidly, but midway a board creaked ominously. A noise as of hasty flight came from below. He dashed down the remaining steps and opened the door. A chilly blast blew against his face. A window was open. Hastily making a light and shouting for Ormesson, who came hurriedly down, they entered the room. Considerable disorder prevailed; all the drawers of the desk and other pieces of furniture had been pulled out and searched. Ormesson rushed to the one in which the mysterious document had been placed. It was empty. The original bit of oiled silk with its secret message, box and all, was gone!

CHAPTER III

WHEREIN AN EXPEDITION STARTS AND A BASE PLOT IS REVEALED

A HEARTY breakfast was eaten by candle-light and the strange event of the night discussed. Pierre examined the floor near the window and discovered the muddy print of a moccasin.

"You see I was not mistaken. It must have been the same person I saw looking in at us," exclaimed Jean triumphantly.

"Who can it be, I wonder," was his father's anxious query, "who has a knowledge of the existence of this store of skins? It is odd that he should have known about the curious drawing; stranger, too, that he should have appeared upon the scene only a few hours after we had discovered it."

"Time alone will explain these mysteries," replied Ormesson; "the occurrence, however, is unfortunate, for it has put our secret in the possession of an outsider and will add greatly to the hazard of the boys' adventure."

The other shuddered at the words.

"I wish this had not happened," was all he said, but the tender look of anxiety that filled his eyes as they rested on his sons showed the character of his thoughts more clearly than any number of words could have shown them.

The hour of parting at last arrived. The lads, after one affectionate embrace of both father and uncle, picked up their firearms and blankets and ran quickly out of the house so as not to show their emotion, and strode down the street at a rapid pace, bravely whistling as they went. They were thus learning early one of the most distressing hardships of a soldier's life—the pangs of parting from those knit close to him by the bonds of deepest affection.

In a short time they were marching down from the Citadel, in the rear of a company of two hundred soldiers, to the wharf of the Lower Town, whence the expedition was to set out. Here all was confusion for an hour, caused by the troops settling themselves in the fleet of canoes prepared for them, the bestowing of baggage in proper place, the shouts of the helpers, the loud talking of the populace gathered to see them off, the crying of children frightened at the unwonted excitement, the barking of dogs and the general running to and fro of messengers bearing farewells from friends and relatives, or orders from the Governor. At last everything was in readiness and all awaited, paddle in hand, the word to start. Frontenac, standing at the water's edge superintending the whole scene, waved his handkerchief and an instant later, Boom! came the roar of a signal gun from the Fort. At the sound two hundred paddles struck the water, and the great flotilla moved off on its long journey, amid the shouts of farewell from a thousand throats and an answering cheer from the fleet. In a second of silence that followed, the three boys, who had a canoe to themselves, heard two familiar voices cry "*Au revoir!*" and "*Bon voyage!*" and they knew that Ormesson and his brother-in-law had come down to get a last glimpse of them. The frail craft formed in a line four abreast, that passed swiftly up the river: a familiar *chanson* was raised in which all joined, dipping their paddles in unison with the rhythm of the music. A last faint cheer from the shore was heard and the expedition was fairly started.

After a time, when the enthusiasm of the departure had subsided and the men had settled down to steady work, using long, easy strokes, silent save for an occasional jest, Pierre and Jean related to François the adventures of the previous night. He opened his eyes wide with surprise and gave a long, low whistle. After a moment's thoughtful silence, his face lighted up with excitement as a thought occurred to his mind.

"I think I can solve the mystery," he exclaimed, "for in the crowd as we marched down to the wharf I caught a glimpse of that half-bred son of your uncle."

"'The Rat'!" exclaimed the two brothers in dismay.

"Yes, 'The Rat'" replied François firmly. "He has not been here since the day of your uncle's death. His visits to Quebec always mean mischief. I would take my oath he was at the bottom of the disturbance last night."

The news of the probable identity of the midnight intruder served to quiet the two brothers and set them thinking, as they sped noiselessly along. This knowledge also brought to their minds great possibilities of danger in their quest for the lost skins, and helped to harden their determination to come off victors in the conflict ahead of them.

Four days elapsed, and Montreal was reached. Here fifty reinforcements were added to their number and the party thus augmented hurried on toward the mouth of the Ottawa without delay. A landing was usually made an hour before sunset and a rude camp hastily arranged. It was the regular duty of the three boys as scouts to plunge immediately into the forest and make a careful search in all directions for a league's distance from the camp, in order to make sure that there were no signs of the close proximity of any savages.

On the first evening after the Ottawa had been reached, an adventure occurred to Pierre that might easily have wrecked the purpose of the expedition. He had completed his part of the inspection of the surrounding district, and was returning after nightfall. He had reached a point a few hundred yards from the edge of the forest when he spied against the glare of the camp fires two figures approaching him. Knowing that it was against orders for any of the troops to enter the woods, lest they might become lost, he stepped behind the huge trunk of a tree and waited to learn, if possible, who it was that thus prowled about the camp after dark. His natural inference was that it was a couple of *coureurs-de-bois*, two score of whom had joined them at Montreal. These hardy trappers, or wood-rangers, although many of them were outlaws, were splendid fighters, and Dorvilliers, anxious to have as large a force as possible, had readily granted their request to go with him against the Indians, without inquiring too closely into their past life or imposing too many restrictions on their conduct, which he knew would not be obeyed.

The two figures approached Pierre in the gloom, talking earnestly in subdued voices. When they reached the other side of the tree behind which he was hiding, they stopped and he was able to hear distinctly all that was said.

"This is far enough for safety," growled one of them. "Dorvilliers does not allow his pets to stray about in the woods, so there is no danger of our being overheard. He has a much larger force with him than I had expected, and one strong enough to force its way through. I hope your plan is a good one, for if we fail in our agreement with those red devils to turn back the expedition, our scalps will not be worth a livre apiece to us."

"Rest easy, *mon ami*," was the calm rejoinder. "It is necessary for us to succeed, as you say, then we *must* succeed. We may have to run severe risks, but it must be done. My plan is very simple: deprive the expedition of its head. With Dorvilliers out of the way, there is no one who might succeed him capable of holding the soldiers to the purpose of their journey when they began to experience what is ahead of them."

"But how?" asked the other voice impatiently. "He sticks close to camp and one would hardly dare to assassinate him before them all."

"You might not, but I would," was the cool rejoinder. "While making a portage, I shall work my way near to him, and when the proper moment arrives shall put a bullet in his head and disappear in the forest before the dunces about him have had time to get over their surprise. Once under cover with a few seconds' start, I need not fear their clownish pursuit."

A long-drawn breath of surprise was his companion's only answer to this bold scheme. The other continued earnestly:

"Your part will be to mingle with the new troops and entertain them with tales of the redskins' cruelty, their torture of prisoners and the like. This will tend to soften their courage, and when they find themselves without a leader, they will be the first to suggest a quick return to safety. After I do my work, you can slip away and join me later at the meeting-place agreed upon. Come, let us lose no time; but return to the camp and you can begin this

very night to tell the new recruits of the many perils they are about to encounter."

With these words the two men set off at a leisurely pace, while Pierre issued from his place of concealment and followed them at a safe distance in his endeavour to learn their identity. He was unsuccessful, however, as the conspirators had mingled with the groups of men in camp by the time he emerged from the forest.

There was but one thing for him to do and that was to report at once to his leader this design upon his life. Luckily he found him sitting alone upon a log in front of the fire smoking industriously, yet with an eye alert to all that was going on about him. He was a younger son of a noble family who had come to New France content to draw his sword for his King, even though it might be in obscurity. Young, generous, frank, brave as a lion and possessed of a winning personality, he made many friends and was loved devotedly by his own men. He had thus early captured the regard of the three boys, and had taken a strong interest in them because of the many qualities of heart and mind, similar to his own, that he detected in their youthful natures. He greeted Pierre with a welcoming smile:

"Have my brave scouts discovered a nest of savage hornets ready to assail us, or does the forest present its usual tranquil aspect?"

"White devils instead of red are the only ones to be feared at present, monsieur," replied Pierre soberly.

"*Ma foi!* and have we treason to combat; inside enemies as well as outside foes? Come, *mon ami*, and sit beside me on this log and tell me what you have discovered. Speak low and in a manner as though we conversed of ordinary matters. Unfriendly eyes may be at this very moment observing us closely."

Pierre obeyed his bidding and related calmly what he had learned of the diabolical plot. When he had finished, Dorvilliers was silent a moment, then blowing a succession of smoke rings in a lazy manner exclaimed with a sight of relief:

"I swear it has nothing to do with my soldier boys. They are faithful I know, to a man. It is only among these dare-devil *coureurs-de-bois* that the danger

lurks. He that will have fire must bear with smoke. I realized that they were an unruly lot when I permitted them to join us, but I did not suppose any would be so base as to side with the Indians against their own countrymen. They are such splendid fighters and know the ways of the savages so thoroughly I felt that they would be a real help to me."

Pierre was astonished at the man's coolness and lack of personal anxiety. He waited for a time expecting to receive some instructions or to hear some plan proposed for the thwarting of the conspirators' purpose. Finding his companion remained silent, he asked earnestly:

"Will you not employ measures to safeguard yourself against the attack of these traitors, monsieur?"

Dorvilliers smiled at his anxiety.

"What would you? We do not know who these would-be murderers are, and are not likely to until the moment of their attempt arrives. To banish all this wild set from our ranks would but cause them to desert to the Indians in a body out of revenge for such summary treatment. No, *mon ami*, we can do nothing but wait, meanwhile watching carefully lest these scoundrels betray themselves by word or action. The knowledge of the existence of this plot must not be spread about among the troops or the guilty ones might change their plans."

Then after a few moments of thoughtful silence he added:

"Explain the situation carefully to your two companions. When we have occasion to make a portage, do you three keep at my heels, and should a *coureur-de-bois* approach, watch him as a cat does a mouse, and, if he makes a hostile movement, shoot him down. You have my authority. And now leave me, we must not be seen conversing too long or earnestly. I thank you heartily for what you have done and shall remember it. Good-night."

Pierre withdrew, and seeking out his companions, imparted the news to their eager ears during the evening meal. They were highly indignant at the presence of such treachery, and lay down to rest resolving that they would do all in their power to protect their beloved commander, little dreaming how soon they would be called on for action.

Early the next afternoon it was found necessary to make a long portage. Obedient to instructions, the three boys walked close behind their leader, keeping careful watch of every one that drew near during the confusion of the land tramp. All seemed engaged about their own affairs, busy in making as rapid progress as possible over the uneven path. The soldiers, unaccustomed to such travel, perspired under their loads as they toiled along. The *coureurs-de-bois* on their part made easier work, due to long familiarity with similar situations.

When the distance was about half covered, Pierre noticed that one of the *coureurs-de-bois* gradually edged up toward them and, after giving him a rough but hearty greeting walked alongside, occasionally making some remark regarding the ruggedness of their path, or telling a story from his rich experience in the wilds. Their route soon led them through a swampy bit of land, covered with tufts of rank grass between which the soil saturated with moisture quaked beneath their tread. This condition of affairs made the way still more difficult and in places dangerous, so that conversation as a rule ceased entirely, as each man devoted his entire attention to his own movements. At a moment when the party were busy picking their way carefully, stepping upon the firmer places, and Pierre's companion was in the midst of telling of a similar swamp, only larger, situated a hundred miles farther north, he suddenly without warning, and while still talking, raised his gun and took a hasty aim at Dorvilliers' back. Pierre, although on the alert, was taken a little by surprise and was unable to do more than strike the muzzle of the rascal's gun upward the same instant that it went off. His sudden action caused the party to halt suddenly, but no one seemed to realize for an instant what had happened. Even the three boys who had been waiting expectantly for just this very moment, now that it had come, seemed powerless to act. With a cry of rage at being thus baulked in his murderous purpose, the man made a bolt for the woods some thirty yards to one side. In his haste, however, he slipped on a bunch of grass and dropped his gun. Not stopping to pick it up, he recovered his balance and hurried on.

Dorvilliers, who, at the sound of the shot, had wheeled

"'THUS PERISH ALL TRAITORS.'"

quickly about, raised his hand to deter any of his followers from action, preferring to bring the villain down himself. As he took aim, the man floundered into a hole up to his knees. Dorvilliers hesitated. Extricating himself with difficulty, the fugitive took another step that sunk him deeper in the ooze and quicksand than before. Then it was that he found himself stuck fast and gradually sinking farther. Turning half around he called for help, but Dorvilliers, who had grasped the situation and lowered his gun, motioned that he be left alone. The man's struggles by this time had caused him to sink to the waist. His position was indeed perilous. Without assistance, he realized that he was doomed to a horrible death.

Seeing that no aid was forthcoming, he cursed the group of onlookers, who were held spellbound by the terrible sight. A moment of extreme tension for all passed. The man had now disappeared almost to the shoulders. In an agony of despair he held out his arms toward his former companions, beseeching them to shoot him and thus end his misery. Pierre and François turned pale while Jean shuddered and hid his face in his hands. A moment more and only the man's neck and head were visible. He was speechless now, but his eyes gleamed alternately with hatred and terror. A few seconds, and they were closed forever. The work of destruction went on so rapidly that in another minute where, but a brief time before a man had stood, there was only to be seen a dark, slimy pool. The treacherous earth had meted out fit punishment for his villainy. Even Dorvilliers was moved and, as the last vestige of his enemy disappeared, shuddered as he said in an impressive voice :

" Thus perish all traitors ! "

A moment later the march was resumed in silence, a strange awe falling upon all who had witnessed the dreadful spectacle. That night in camp it was rumoured that another *coureur-de-bois* had mysteriously disappeared. It was the dead man's partner in crime, whose accusing conscience filled him with an unutterable fear of being found out and drove him to the solitudes of the forest, rather than remain among his countrymen, whose vengeance he dreaded.

CHAPTER IV

TELLS HOW A CRISIS WAS REACHED AND A HEROIC RESOLVE MADE

THE tragic death of the man who had made the dastardly attempt upon the life of the leader of the war party had an unfortunate effect upon the relations between the regular soldiers and the remaining *coureurs-de-bois*. The former looked with suspicion upon their irregular allies, while the latter, although denouncing in unmeasured terms the crime of their associate, declaring themselves loyal to Dorvilliers and the purpose of the expedition, resented the fact that no effort had been made to rescue their unfortunate comrade, claiming the right for him of being tried and shot for treason the same as any soldier. This friction increased rapidly during the next two days and on the morning of the third the camp was relieved to find that the entire group of *coureurs-de-bois* had stolen away during the night and started on their return journey to Montreal.

The next day a serious accident occurred. Dorvilliers, while a portage was being made, stepped on a moss-grown log and fell, spraining an ankle severely. His pain was so great that the party went into camp for forty-eight hours. Finding his agony growing worse, he realized that his usefulness was at an end. So he sent for Lieutenant Viger, whom he appointed to the command of the expedition. After a long harangue to the men in which he praised their previous conduct and steadfastness of purpose, he exhorted them to remain loyal to their new leader as they had been to him, detached twenty-five of the soldiers to act as a guard, and embarked in great suffering for Quebec.

The loss of their chief and the weakening of their force

by the withdrawal of his body-guard decidedly dampened the ardour of those who remained. The new commander, Viger, although a brave and generally efficient soldier, had had but little experience in Indian warfare, hence he did not possess their full confidence, nor was he personally able to arouse their enthusiasm as Dorvilliers could. To add to these difficulties, a series of hardships ensued. A belated cold spell occurred during which some of the new troops were badly frozen, while countless ears and noses were nipped by the frosty air. Then, too, their gradual approach to the enemy's country necessitated the stopping of all hunting by the friendly Indians accompanying them, who heretofore had kept the camp well supplied with fresh game. Notwithstanding these trials, the men pushed on, grumbling among themselves, but without any outspoken complaints.

As the savages were likely to be met any day, Viger instructed the three boys to proceed several hours ahead of the main body in order to spy out, if possible, any signs of their dreaded foes.

One afternoon, while paddling silently among the shadows of the left bank, a distant gunshot was heard in front of them. After proceeding cautiously for some distance, they landed, and hiding their canoe, proceeded on foot in the direction from which the sound had come. Carefully working their way through the woods, they were able to approach an Indian camp, containing about fifty warriors, without detection. The braves, although in full war paint, were lazily lying about the encampment apparently unconscious of the approach of a superior hostile force, depending on their outposts, whom the boys had evaded, to notify them in time if any danger appeared. Having gathered all the information they could, the young scouts withdrew without betraying their presence, and returned in haste to the main body, which they found disembarking for the night at a point on the river about two leagues below.

They reported the state of affairs to their leader, who gave immediate orders that no fires should be lighted and that no unnecessary noise be made. The men sat around upon the ground shivering and eating the unsavoury food

served out to them in silence. Their nearness to savage foes recalled to their minds the many tales of cruelty and butchery they had heard from the *coureurs-de-bois*, and they eyed the near-by forest with furtive looks as though expecting to see dark forms creeping out upon them. Night soon came on and made matters worse. The weird cries of the owls caused them to start in nervous apprehension, while the mournful sound of the wind among the pines seemed to their affrighted ears to foretell disaster and defeat.

This state of inaction and suspense was finally relieved. At midnight the command was given them to enter their canoes noiselessly, and the entire force proceeded cautiously up the river. A short distance below the place of the Indian camp, one half of the troops were landed and ordered, after a two hours' halt, to approach the enemy.

The remainder, under the Lieutenant, led by the three boys, paddled to the opposite side of the river, then proceeded with the utmost secrecy past the savage encampment, whose low-burning fires were plainly visible. A score of men were left behind to drift down the stream so as to cut off escape by water. The remainder landed above and silently advanced, spreading out through the woods as they progressed. Thus did the French have the redskins practically surrounded.

At last the first grey streaks of dawn appeared. When it grew a little lighter, a signal gun was fired and the troops rushed upon the unsuspecting enemy. The savages, taken entirely by surprise, for several of their sentries had been captured and despatched in the dark, were shot down without mercy in their bewilderment. A brisk half-hour of conflict and the victory was complete. Two prisoners only were taken; the rest lay dead upon the ground near the spot where they had been asleep. It was not known that any had escaped.

One strange episode occurred during the attack. Lieutenant Viger, while aiming at one of the luckless savages, was surprised at hearing him cry out in perfect French:

"*Sauvez-moi, je suis Français!* ("Save me, I am French")

On investigation the supposed redskin proved to be a French officer, La Plante by name, captured by the Indians

in a raid on La Chine some three years before. He had been treated as a slave all this time, performing the most menial offices for his red masters. They had forced him to assume their dress, so t. : it was no wonder that in the half light of early morning he should have been mistaken for a foe. His joy at his deliverance knew no bounds. He was quickly fitted out with civilized garments so that he was able to sit down to breakfast with the Lieutenant as an honoured guest. After sending out a number of men on picket duty, among whom were the three boys, Lieutenant Viger ordered the rest of his command to seek their much-needed sleep.

While engaged in this task, Jean discovered at a point some distance off a half-conscious Indian who had managed to crawl away undetected. He was very much exhausted through loss of blood from a wound in the back, but was intent on making his escape, although so terribly weakened that he had to stop every few paces and rest before creeping any further. Jean saw on his approach that he was unarmed and incapable of harming him. His first idea was that of conveying him to camp as a prisoner ; but the utter helplessness of his foe appealed to his tender heart and awakened within him thoughts of mercy. He accordingly examined the wound, and, bringing water in his cap, bathed it tenderly. After tearing his shirt into strips, he bound the wound up carefully so that all bleeding ceased. He also gave the sufferer a few drops of brandy, which aided materially in restoring the redskin's strength. The latter watched these proceedings curiously and, when finally it dawned upon him that his enemy meant only kindness, the look of hatred and suspicion faded from his eyes. Jean also offered him food from his pouch, which was eaten ravenously. By this time the fugitive was sitting up.

" If you feel able," suggested Jean, apprehensive lest some of the other scouts approach, " I would advise you to start. There is your way," pointing through the woods; " go, and some day when you find a wounded Frenchman, treat him as I have treated you, instead of taking his scalp."

When the Indian ealized that Jean had not only relieved his sufferings, but that he offered to allow him to

escape, his whole bearing changed. He arose with great dignity and replied in broken French :

" The Little Hunter is brave and will one day be a great chief among his people. The Great Manitou has made his skin white but has given him a big heart. If Onontio at Quebec had sent more men like Little Hunter into the forest, my tribe and the French would be at peace. Winnatoka will always remember Little Hunter and will sing of his goodness in the lodges of his people."

With these closing words he turned without a gesture of farewell and stalked noiselessly away, and in a moment was lost to view.

Jean stood leaning upon his gun watching the retreating figure.

" Humph ! " he muttered in disgust. " Not even a ' thank you ' for letting him off ! The redskins must be an ungrateful lot. Perhaps it's only their way, but I doubt not, if we were ever to meet again and he had the chance, he would run his knife over my scalp without a twinge of conscience. Nevertheless, I'm glad I let him off easily. He was as helpless as a baby when I found him, and it would have been mean to have taken advantage of his weakness."

When the lads were relieved from duty, Jean related his experience to François and his brother. From the latter he received a sharp reproof :

" You have fine ideas of a soldier's duty, haven't you, letting this redskin escape so that he can warn the rest that we are coming ? You may yet foil the purpose of the expedition with your chicken-heartedness ! "

François looked very grave.

" Pierre is right about giving the alarm, but there's no use scolding or regretting now ; the harm, if any, is done and can't be mended."

Then seeing Jean's troubled face he clapped him kindly on the shoulder adding :

" Never mind, *mon ami*, you did it from a good motive. If there was a little more humanity shown in the wilds by the French, I doubt not there would be less trouble with the redskins."

After further discussion, it was deemed best not to

mention the occurrence to anyone in camp, not even to their leader. It would only bring down blame on Jean's young shoulders for his indiscretion, while nothing could be done to offset the possible harm done.

The next morning it was reported that a canoe laden with provisions, a small keg of brandy, and a gun and ammunition had disappeared during the night. The three boys exchanged a glance of intelligence, knowing full well who had been the thief, but said nothing. Jean, the young rascal, secretly rejoiced at the news, as he realized that Winnatoka had obtained the means of returning to his own people in safety.

This bit of excitement was swallowed up in an event of far greater importance. It was noticed that on the previous evening the soldiers gathered about the two prisoners with much interest, and, after talking with them at some length retired in groups, conversing earnestly among themselves with much headshaking.

When the usual morning command to embark was given, Lieutenant Viger was surprised to find that the troops loitered about the camp instead of obeying with their accustomed alacrity. He repeated the command in person, but with the same result. Furious, he drew his sword and advancing to a group exclaimed :

" What does this mean ? Mutiny ? "

One of the men, acting as spokesman, took a step forward and saluted respectfully :

" Not mutiny, but self-preservation. We have learned that your information in regard to the number of savages to be encountered is incorrect. There are enough ahead of us to exterminate a force double the strength of ours."

" And do you mean to consider one howling savage the equal in combat of a soldier of France ?" was the Lieutenant's contemptuous query.

" No, but when it is ten to one, fighting not in the open, but from behind rocks and trees, we do," was the calm rejoinder. " Not a man of us but what is loyal to King and Colony, and would assault the very Citadel of Quebec itself were that in the hands of an enemy, if there were the slightest hope of success. But here it is different. No soldier is called upon to commit suicide in a hopeless cause.

The men have learned from the prisoners of the number awaiting them, and one and all refuse to proceed."

The Lieutenant bit his lip with rage but controlled himself.

"Bring the prisoners to me," he commanded, "and I will question them before you all, and force their lying lips for once to speak the truth."

La Plante, the rescued officer, now approached and learned the state of affairs from the Lieutenant.

"They lie, the dogs!" he exclaimed passionately. "There are not fifty redskins on the whole Ottawa. 'Tis true there were a thousand; but on hearing of an approaching force of regulars, they quickly set out for their homes. Only a few scattered bands remain, who, like the one destroyed yesterday, have tarried too long."

The prisoners, securely bound, were placed before the Lieutenant. He turned in triumph to the soldiers who had gathered round to listen to La Plante:

"Now, whom will you believe, these lying curs or one of your own race?"

No reply was made, but he could see that the men remained unconvinced.

Raising his sword, he rested the point lightly upon the breast of one of the prisoners.

"Speak truth, redskin, or this sword will cut your lying, murderous heart in twain," he cried with a menacing air. "Tell me how many more of your tribe are encamped upon or near the Ottawa?"

The savage did not wince before the danger to which he was exposed. When the Lieutenant ceased speaking, he replied:

"The great white chief has an evil spirit that rages within him, but I will tell him what he wants to know." Then nodding with his head towards the wood he continued solemnly: "You see the forest is full of trees along the Ottawa. My people that await you are so many that two warriors would have to hide behind each tree."

Enraged at this reply, the Lieutenant with a snarl of fury plunged his sword through the captive's chest, who fell dead at his feet without a sound. A murmur of disapproval arose on all sides, although no action was taken. Lieutenant

Viger, who at heart was of a brave and generous nature, felt ashamed of his act; but advancing his blade to the breast of the other savage, he made once again the same threat and asked the same question. The Indian, although he knew that an identical fate was in store for him, never faltered, but looking his questioner calmly in the eye replied firmly:

"My brother has spoken."

The Lieutenant with an inarticulate oath flung his sword to the ground and retired raging to his quarters. La Plante picked up his weapon and joined him, the two remaining in consultation the rest of the day. The troops, feeling their position secure, lounged about the camp awaiting the time when their leader, bowing to the inevitable, would give the command for their return home. The three boys, reclining apart beneath a tree, discussed the situation among themselves. Pierre proceeded to relieve his pent-up feelings.

"It is a shame for real soldiers to turn cowards in the face of difficulty. If I were the Governor, when this party arrives at Quebec, I should pack the whole lot off to France with a letter to the King asking him to send men, not panic-stricken fools."

"I heartily agree with you," replied François in a disgusted tone. "But what hurts me most is the realization that the purpose of the expedition will have to be given up."

Jean chewed a pine-needle in moody silence. Presently his eyes sparkled and a spot of colour glowed beneath the tan of his cheeks. "It must not be given up!" he exclaimed with conviction. "It shan't be done. Shame on us all if there be found none to carry out the Governor's design. I for one shall volunteer to go on, if I have to do it alone."

"Bravo!" cried François. "Your idea is excellent. Why shouldn't we three press on to Michilimackinac, finding out on the way just what dangers may threaten the trappers and their furs? We can report to them, and if we find, as I think, but few enemies to oppose their progress (for I believe La Plante knows what he is talking about) the fleet can yet come through in safety and the Colony be helped. On our return we can take up the matter of

searching for the lost cargo of skins that your father needs so badly."

"And all this time 'The Rat' will be helping himself to them at his leisure," growled Pierre.

"Which ought to be first in our minds," asked Jean gravely—"our duty to the Colony or our private affairs?"

Pierre received this gentle rebuke in good part.

"Right you are, Jean. I was but expressing the first selfish thought that came into my head. Had we not better tell the Lieutenant of our plan?"

They sought an interview with their leader, who was still with La Plante. François acted as spokesman.

"We three have decided an important matter among ourselves and wish our commander's approval of the scheme," he began; but he was interrupted by the Lieutenant, who said bitterly:

"Why then do you come to me? The command of this expedition seems to rest in the hands of every chicken-livered trooper that chooses to exercise it. I receive orders, I do not give them." Then with an effort he continued: "But come, speak what is in your mind, it will at least prove diverting."

François proceeded, and as he did so the leader's eyes sparkled with delight. When he had finished, the Lieutenant slapped his thigh in admiration.

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed turning to La Plante, "there are to be found some brave hearts in the company, even though they beat in the breasts of babes. You have my full permission, *mes amis*, to carry out this daring scheme. The rest of us start for Quebec at daybreak like a pack of whipped curs. Leave whenever you please and take whatever you deem necessary in the way of supplies or ammunition. God bless your brave souls!" And the impulsive officer wrung the hands of each.

After they had left, he turned to La Plante with a sigh:

"Their enthusiasm borders upon rashness. Perhaps I should have forbidden them. I did what I thought best. If they succeed, the material interests of the Colony are saved. If they fail," with a shrug of the shoulders, "there will be three mouths less for the Governor to feed in Quebec next winter."

CHAPTER V

IN WHICH AN ENEMY IS MET AND MISFORTUNE ENSUES.

PROMPTLY at daybreak did the expedition begin what was in effect an ignominious retreat. They had penetrated into the enemy's country, won a complete victory in the only action in which they had taken part, yet had suddenly become panic-stricken owing to the tales of the trappers and their own imaginations. Brave men have done worse than that before and since. In reality they were conquered by the element of mystery—mystery as to the number of their foes, and their known secret methods of appearing, striking a blow and vanishing, only to reappear when least expected or desired. It took years of constant service in the Colony before a soldier, fresh from the battlefields of Europe, could unlearn all that he had been taught by the best drill-masters of the age, and adapt himself to a mode of warfare that knew nothing of battalion or company action, but depended entirely upon individual activity from behind a tree or rock or rotting log. Lieutenant Viger, when his anger and chagrin had worn away, understood the situation thoroughly and realized that he was powerless to affect the determination of the men not to proceed. He accordingly made the best of a bad affair and stood upon the shore wrapped in his military cloak superintending the embarkation with a dignified calmness. His was the last canoe to turn its prow homeward, and from his seat in the stern he waved a cordial adieu to the three boys, who stood on the shore beside their own frail craft until the rearguard of the party was lost to sight behind a distant bend of the river.

Now that the excitement at first attending their brave resolution had subsided, something of a reaction set in. Not that they regretted for one moment the stand that they had taken, but the sight of the departure of their comrades brought a realization not only of the dangers and hardships of their course, but an added sense of responsibility, as they thought seriously of all that the success or failure of their attempt meant to the present and future welfare of the Colony. A crisis had arisen which the doughty Frontenac had striven to meet with all the resources at his command; but he had failed. Men old enough to be their fathers and trained to a life of danger had shrunk back when put to the test. On their youthful shoulders now lay the completion of the task which their elders had laid down. If they failed, no blame would attach to them. If they succeeded in the great undertaking, great praise would be their due. These sober thoughts tended to check the natural impulse to proceed at once upon their journey, so they sat down upon the river's edge to take council as to what was the best thing to do first.

After an hour's conversation it was decided that, owing to the probable near presence of the redskins in unknown force, it would be safer to proceed up the river only at night. The friendly darkness would minimize their risk of discovery and augment the chance of their being able to reach their destination without unnecessary delay. The canoe was accordingly hidden in the bushes and the three sought repose instead of action.

At dusk after a hearty meal they set forth, and the second and more perilous portion of their journey was begun. The night passed without incident and daylight found them and their canoe hidden away from too curious eyes. During the second evening there occurred their first mishap.

They had been paddling for about two hours after dark and were proceeding rapidly along their route, the cold night air giving zest to their efforts, when suddenly they shot by a projecting point of land and found themselves full in the glare of a good-sized fire on the shore about which three or four stalwart forms were standing. An impenetrable thicket covering the point had shut off all signs of

light to one coming from their direction. The hearts of the three seemed to cease beating for an instant. As if by one common thought, they shipped their paddles noiselessly and threw themselves flat in the bottom of the canoe. Their only hope was that when their momentum had ceased the current would carry them back down the river again out of the illuminated area before those on shore had noticed their approach. No sound from the encampment indicated that they had been discovered.

Gradually the speed of the canoe slackened until it finally stopped. Then, after a moment's hesitation, the current seized it and began to carry it in the desired direction. The boys lay breathless in their uncomfortable position straining every ear to catch any suspicious sound. Once only were they alarmed by what proved to be the gurgling of the water under their bows. After a time François shifted his position slightly so that he could look up to the sky and see if the reflection of the fire was still observable. If it was not, he knew that they had drifted back behind the projecting point to a place of safety. He was dismayed to find the glare not only visible but apparently growing brighter as he watched. A moment or two and he was convinced that they were drifting steadily near the shore. He was still cogitating as to what had best be done when the canoe touched the bank with a slight shock and he beheld the ferocious face of a savage, daubed generously with war paint, looking down at him.

Realizing that further attempts at concealment were useless, the three lads sat up and found themselves moored to the bank by the stalwart arm of a redskin, while two others stood over them gun in hand. A fourth waded out of the water. The mystery was explained. They had evidently been seen at the time of their appearance and one of the Indians, swimming noiselessly out to them, had gently guided their canoe to shore without their knowledge. Their position was perilous in the extreme, but there was no help for it. To attempt to escape was folly, as at least two of them would be instantly shot. The danger must be resolutely faced with the hope that an opportunity for flight might arise later.

Accordingly, at a gesture from one who seemed to be the

leader of the band, the boys arose from their cramped position and stepped ashore. One of their captors hauled the canoe high up on land and began to explore with curious fingers all that it contained. The prisoners were led to the fire, where their ankles were securely bound by withes made out of the wild grape vine. After being deprived of their hunting knives they were allowed the free use of their arms, and some food was placed before them. The leader waited politely until the prisoners had finished, then bound their wrists and left them for the night. Soon the camp was quiet, all of the Indians going to sleep without bothering their minds concerning the prisoners, evidently trusting to their bonds to keep them from escaping.

The boys conversed in whispers.

"Isn't this just our luck," groaned Pierre, "to run into danger with our eyes wide open?"

"I blame myself for our capture," replied François. "We should have travelled more slowly and carefully."

Jean hastened to defend his friend from his own censure:

"It wasn't anyone's fault as far as I can see. We were all equally to blame." Then after a pause: "I suppose that this is one of the small parties Monsieur La Plante told about. I am glad it is no larger. It will be a pity if the three of us cannot give four savages the slip."

One of the Indians having awakened and risen to tend the fire, came over to the group and examined their fetters. For some reason his suspicions were aroused that they might be plotting to escape, so after dragging them further apart he lay down beside them and went to sleep once more. The lads believing that no imminent harm threatened them, quickly followed suit, realizing that perhaps they would need all their strength on the morrow.

While eating breakfast the whole party was surprised at hearing a human call from the opposite shore. A solitary figure standing there was seen to plunge into the water. He soon landed, dripping like a spaniel. The savage appeared very much exhausted, but possessed of a voracious appetite. When this was satisfied, he wrapped himself up in a blanket and sank down beside the fire to sleep.

The remaining braves gathered together and conversed in

subdued voices. Judging from the frequent glances cast in th· direction, the topic under discussion was the disposal of the captives. Three seemed united in one plan, while they were vigorously opposed by the fourth, who spoke rapidly and with much earnestness, although in tones so low that the boys were able to catch but a few words. They made out, however, that the three wished to take the prisoners home with them and adopt them into the tribe, while the suggestive gestures about the scalp-lock of the fourth told pretty plainly that he advocated more summary proceedings.

Promptly at noon the newcomer awoke and called for more food. When this was dispatched, he intimated that he was ready to relate his adventures. Accordingly, he was quickly surrounded by the four, who gave close attention to his discourse.

"Look out for trouble," muttered François. "From all I can make out that half-starved brute is one that escaped from the band we helped to destroy four days ago. The others evidently are in ignorance of our expedition having been so near. When they learn how the camp and all that composed it were wiped out of existence, there will be a howl."

François was correct. The hearers restrained their agitation for some time, but when the warrior reached the point in his tale where he told of the slaughter of practically all but himself, a terrific yell burst from the four savage throats, and cries of anger and vengeance quickly followed as their eyes fell upon the hapless prisoners. The leader restrained them, however, and after a few moments of additional consultation the group broke up.

The leader approached the boys with every appearance of friendliness, released their wrists and loosened their ankle bonds so that the circulation was no longer impeded and they could take tiny steps. He brought them food, told them that they could move about the camp at pleasure and left them to their own devices.

François looked very grave at this turn of affairs. He knew that immediately preceding some of their most shocking barbarities the redskins usually overpowered the prisoners destined for the torture with kindly attentions.

Their captors were naturally filled with vengeful feelings as a result of the recent battle and, worst of all, seemed to be of one mind, all arguing among them having ceased. This boded ill for the future disposition of the captives.

The newcomer was the only one who did not seemingly ignore their presence. He walked up to them and looked them over with eyes fairly blazing with hatred and savage animosity. He seemed to have especially vindictive feelings against Jean. Probably the idea that so small and young lad was on the active warpath against his tribe rankled in his breast. Finally his evil desires overcame him and he took pleasure in tormenting the youth by pinching his arms and legs and slapping his cheeks sharply. Jean was unmoved for a while, but after one specially atrocious pinch his anger flashed forth and he gave the redskin a quick, hard blow in the eye with his fist that closed, temporarily at least, that useful organ of vision for its owner, as he fell sprawling on his back.

A howl of rage ensued, and the Indian jumping to his feet seized the reckless boy and dragged him to the other side of the camp, where he placed him standing with his back against a huge forest tree.

"I make papoose jump," he cried, as he retired some twenty paces off. Picking up a hatchet from the ground, he hurled it at Jean's head, his intent being to come as near as possible to him without actual injury. Jean did not enter into this sort of sport with any degree of enthusiasm. So when he saw the flashing weapon coming through the air at him, he hobbled to one side, allowing it to bury its sharp edge in the tree trunk behind him. In an instant he had wrenched it loose, leaned down, and at one blow released his ankles and stood erect again, freed from all restraint, and with a dangerous weapon in his hand.

A cry of alarm rose from the other four redskins who, up to this time, had remained passive spectators of the scene. It did not at all suit their purpose to have an unbound captive in their midst armed with one of their own battle-axes. Jean's assailant, enraged at the boy's cleverness, drew another hatchet from his belt and let it drive full at the youth with murderous intent. It was lucky for Jean that he and Pierre had often in sport practised tossing

and catching by the handle both hatchets and knives until they had become quite expert. The result was that he dexterously caught the flying weapon in his unoccupied hand and then, seeing that his enemy was about to make a rush upon him, he returned the hatchet with such skill that it caught the onrushing savage in the forehead, causing him to fall dead at his feet.

Jean was greatly taken aback at the success of his stroke. It had been an instinctive blow struck in pure self-defence, a fact that, although it might serve to ease his own conscience, would by no means be taken into consideration by the dead man's friends. In fact, they were already bent upon revenge for, each seizing the nearest weapon, gun or hatchet, the four rushed upon the luckless youth. He realized that no matter how successful his next blow might be, he could not hope to fell more than one of his antagonists. There remained the other three fully armed who, blinded by their fury, would make short work in dispatching him to accompany the warrior at his feet upon his journey to the happy hunting ground.

A sudden inspiration seized the lad, for with a quick motion he hurled the hatchet into the river, took a step or two forward and stood with folded arms calmly awaiting the onset of his foes, helpless and unguarded. The coolness of the act aroused a feeling of admiration in the breasts of the savages and quieted their wrath for the time being, for they contented themselves with seizing him roughly and binding him to a near-by tree so that he could move neither head nor limbs. Seeing murder in their actions, François, who together with Pierre had beheld the recent events with wondering eyes, hardly realizing why he did it, arose and called to the redskins in an authoritative voice to stop. The malicious devils turned at this interruption.

"Shame on you for a pack of cowardly curs!" he cried desperately. "Are the Iroquois a people that make war only upon women and children? Are you able only to torture a mere papoose? Look at him. When you were his age, you were still at home playing in the dirt or gathering sticks for firewood. And yet he has killed one of your warriors in a fair fight. Keep him tightly bound," he added scornfully. "Were he to get loose, four more

lodges among your tribe would be empty, four great chiefs slain by a boy!"

If François's idea was to divert the redskins' attention from Jean to himself, he succeeded. Stung by his taunts and snarling with rage, they abandoned whatever they were about to do to the younger lad and rushed pellmell upon the other two prisoners. Nothing daunted, François remained immobile while Pierre, scrambling to his feet, stood alongside him, filled with a vague desire to rally to his support, although realizing that he was equally helpless to resist. Firm was the front turned toward the advancing foe, who were close upon them. Already was a gleaming hatchet poised in mid-air, already had one seized a gun with vindictive purpose.

Just at this moment the eyes of one of the Indians caught sight of a canoe with a single occupant that had just come into view around the point. The four stopped, again diverted from their purpose. After a moment's inspection of the stranger, a shout was given and returned, the canoe's prow was turned toward the camp and soon grated on the pebbles as its owner landed. The Indians met him with evident pleasure, all talking and gesticulating at once. As he approached the fire, Jean from his uncomfortable position eyed him narrowly; then his heart gave a sudden start as he recognized the swarthy features of Winnatoka.

CHAPTER VI

SHOWS HOW EASY IT IS TO FALL FROM THE FRYING-PAN INTO THE FIRE

THE deference paid to Winnatoka seemed to indicate that he was a chief of importance among his own people. He listened gravely as the rest related the events which had occurred during the past twenty-four hours. When they had finished, he stalked over to the spot where Pierre and François were lying. After eyeing them stolidly for a moment or two, he gave a grunt and then approached Jean. If he recognized his former benefactor, he gave no sign. Returning to his companions he talked earnestly for a few moments. His words evidently carried great weight, for there was no opposition to what he said. When he finished speaking, he uttered a few words of command to one of the group, who hastened to release Jean and restored him to his friends. The Indians proceeded next to bury their fallen comrade. When this duty was completed, they spent the remainder of the day leisurely employed about the camp. They paid no attention to the prisoners, save to give them food and water and ease their bonds. Jean communicated his recognition of Winnatoka to the other two.

"Lots of good he will be to us!" said Pierre in a low voice. ,"He has accepted favours from your hand, but I doubt if he will recollect them now. I fear his memory will be too short for that."

François was more encouraging.

"You are wrong there. Although the Iroquois chiefs pride themselves on never forgetting or forgiving an injury, yet they also hold it a matter of honour to do well toward those who have especially favoured them. The fact that

he ordered Jean's release from yonder tree shows that he remembered him. He has evidently urged the others to postpone the carrying out of their revenge until they reach their home. A dozen chances of escape may occur before then. Take courage, *mes amis*, something will happen soon in our favour."

The two brothers, heartened by these words, cast to the winds all feelings of depression caused by their precarious condition, and busied themselves in watching closely the course of events, while their brains sought to devise some means of taking advantage of any favourable turn that might arise.

Toward dusk Winnatoka approached the three and began to examine the thongs that fastened their ankles and wrists. When he came to Jean, he took as long a time as possible for the examination. While so doing he spoke low and hurriedly, his lips scarcely moving at all :

" Little Hunter is in trouble. Winnatoka will help him. He will keep watch to-night. When the camp is still and the owl hoots and the river runs cold, he will release him, and he can steal away. His canoe and gun will be ready for him. Thus will Winnatoka pay the debt he owes him."

Jean's heart rejoiced at these words. He suddenly realized, however, that the redskin had said nothing about his companions.

" My comrades will go, too," he said in some trepidation.

The Indian's brow contracted :

" No, Winnatoka knows not them. They will be taken with us in the morning on our journey. My people will do with them as they please."

Jean shivered at these words, knowing full well what their fate would be. He realized that a bold stroke was necessary, so, assuming a look of indifference he was far from feeling, he replied stoutly :

" You needn't release me, then, for I won't stir a step without them. Does Winnatoka, the great chief, not think his life is worth that of three boys ? He holds himself too cheap. He tries to pay a debt of beaver with rabbit skins."

The savage made no reply, but left him and busied himself about his canoe until the evening meal was ready.

After this was finished, the redskins removed the captives to the forest side of the fire, taking possession themselves of the grassy place on which the boys had been lying. This act looked a little more favourable for their escape. Winnatoka disappeared for a moment to rummage in his canoe, and returned with a tiny cask of brandy. The other Indians loaded the remaining vessels so that a start could be made at break of day without delay, and returned to the camp fire, about which they stretched themselves at their ease. Although they thus placed the fire between themselves and their captives, yet an occasional glance could easily be made in their direction. All four gave a grunt of satisfaction when they saw what their chief had brought, and soon the contents of the cask were being freely imbibed.

The boys were spectators of this pantomime and impatiently awaited the outcome of the debauch.

"It will either help us or seal our fate," remarked François soberly. "If they take enough of the stuff quickly, they will be helpless inside of an hour and we can make all the noise we wish in getting away. If they drink slowly, they may become so excited that the very sight of us will infuriate them. Then good-bye to our ever seeing Quebec again. It would be far less trouble to carry three scalps to their tribe than to convey three boys who they would find to be very much alive and inclined to give them trouble at the earliest opportunity."

Pierre and Jean, appreciating the force of his words, remained silent but watchful. They realized that their fate would be sealed in a very short time. A natural despondency settled down upon them. Thoughts of the far-off home in France and memories of their happy childhood there flashed sharply through their minds. A mist clouded their eyes, as they remembered the pale, delicate-looking mother whose heart had well-nigh burst for love of them, whom they had left behind buried in French soil. A feeling of tenderness swept over them, too, as they realized that their father was at that moment hoping and praying for their safe return in distant Quebec. But their manly natures did not permit them to contemplate such mental pictures, tender and sweet though they were, for long. They resolved to watch alertly for any chance for freedom

and, if they were doomed to die, to meet death unflinchingly with a courage that befitted their birth and training.

After a time Winnatoka approached again ostensibly to see if they were well bound. This time he spoke with less caution :

" If the Little Hunter wishes it, he may go soon. I will loose him now, and when the white man's fire-water makes the Indians stupid he can start back to his own country."

The savage's speech seemed a little thick, showing that the spirits were evidently rapidly gaining control over him. To anger him now might be the means of turning him against them ; but Jean was determined not to gain his own safety and leave his comrades in bondage. He accordingly looked the Indian straight in the eye as he replied :

" No, it is all or none. Winnatoka would blush for his friend Little Hunter when he got home, if he remembered that Little Hunter had slunk away like a cowardly wolf, leaving his friends in a trap. He would despise him."

As he spoke thus bravely, though quaking inwardly, the apparently half-drunk Indian could not help allowing a glance of admiration to kindle in his eyes for a brief instant. Then resuming the stolid look that was his usual expression he replied :

" Little Hunter is brave ; he will some day be a great chief of the palefaces. His heart is big ; he will have many friends come to his lodge. His tongue is straight ; it is not forked like a snake's, talking two ways at once, but speaks words of wisdom ; he will be a leader at the council fires of his nation."

With these words he turned his back upon the prisoners and rejoined his companions, gulping down his share of the fiery fluid that he had brought. Jean was so disappointed at his lack of success in inducing the Indian to accede to his demand that for a moment his eyes were blinded with tears. A moment later he chanced to glance down on the ground at the spot where Winnatoka had stood beside him. In an instant he uttered a muffled cry of joy, his disappointment and despair changing to hope and courage, for there, close to him, lay a knife. He understood now that the savage had thus given him the means for the escape of all without injuring his pride by openly yielding to his insis-

tence. Although his hands were tied, he was able to hold the keen blade lightly in his fingers and rub its sharp edge against the fetters that bound his feet. These quickly yielded. Whispering to Pierre who lay close to him, the two worked their way carefully toward each other, keeping one eye the meanwhile upon their convivial captors, until Jean could reach his brother's wrists. These were free, and Pierre in turn released the younger boy's hands, then went to François' aid. Silently they rubbed themselves to restore their circulation, and consulted in whispers with one another.

By this time one of the Indians had succumbed and lay upon his back loudly snoring. The others were becoming more or less incapacitated with each passing moment. Not daring to wait too long lest the thoughts of the drunken redskins might turn in their direction, the boys decided to run for it through the forest at the first opportunity. Jean fancied he noticed that Winnatoka did not drink as often or as copiously as the rest, and the reason at once flashed into his mind. François, to whom he told his thought, agreed with him :

" Yes," he replied, " the crafty savage is saving his strength and wits and is trying to keep sober, all the while with an eye on us. He has given us the means of escaping and, if we once make a break, his feelings of Indian honour will have been satisfied and he will gladly join in the chase and capture and torture us within an hour, with a clear conscience. Now, are you both ready ? Wait until the next time he lifts the keg to his lips, then slip away and try to keep together."

These directions were received in silence by the two brothers. The moment for action seemed as though it would never come. Their overwrought nerves caused them to start at every unusual sound. The ill-omened cry of an owl across the river was wafted faintly, yet distinctly, to their ears and made them shiver as though it predicted the failure of their attempt to escape. The crackling of the wood in the camp fire sent a shudder through their frames as though the flames were mocking their meditated action, and reminding them of their fate by torture in the near future.

A moment later, after a hasty glance in the direction of the prisoners, Winnatoka took another drink. The same instant the three boys arose noiselessly and glided into the forest. This gave them a few seconds' start. They would have had more leeway, had not Pierre unfortunately stepped upon a dry branch that cracked beneath his weight. A wild yell warned them that their departure had been observed. Francois, glancing over his shoulder, saw by the firelight the four savages running across the open place with Winnatoka in the lead. He realized then that the whole drinking scene had been a farce and that their pursuers were masters of limb and mind. This surmise was not quite correct. The scheme of the redskins had not been thoroughly carried out. They had allowed themselves a few drams of the brandy now and then, but not enough to more than confuse them for an instant when they stood upon their feet. After they had once started running their brains cleared.

The nearest and hence the most likely point for the boys to enter the woods was aimed at by their pursuers. Fortunately the three, François in the lead, had turned sharply to the right as soon as their movements were protected by the trees, and their path lay obliquely toward the river. The redskins hesitated a moment and listened after they were in the shadow. An unlucky step of Pierre gave them the general direction of the boys and with another fearful yell of confidence they started after them.

"Bend low and hurry," was François's warning. "We have a half-minute's start of them now, but we cannot keep it long. They can run in the dark twice as fast as we can."

Admonished thus, the two brothers followed close upon his heels. An occasional noise from the rear told them that the enemy were gaining on them. Fortunately the river was not far distant. When this was reached, they waded in carefully among the shadows without noise until their depth was reached, then struck out for a few strokes and allowed the current to carry them along. A moment later they heard the savages threshing through the woods near the shore a little mystified at the sudden cessation of all sound on their part. By this time they were so far away that they felt emboldened to swim vigorously. Pierre

suddenly realized that they were going in the direction of the camp they had just left and wondered at François's temerity. He made no comment, however, but followed as best he could, trusting to his friend's ready wit to adopt a plan that could be carried out.

The camp fire came in view and François, hugging the shadows of the shore, made straight for the landing. Then it was that his purpose appeared clear to the others. He was bent on seizing the canoes of the redskins, thus shutting off all means of successful pursuit. Land was reached and the three canoes found already loaded for the morrow's start.

"Hurry! Hurry!" cried François in despair, as the halloos from the forest indicated that the redskins had guessed their plan and were hurrying back to intercept them.

Jean jumped into one while the others shoved him off; then Pierre followed quickly, paddling beyond the range of light. François had chosen for himself the largest and most heavily laden of them all. Just as he gave the final push, Winnatoka broke from cover, and with a yell of rage, as he saw what was being done, rushed toward the water. Three seconds more and François was seated with paddle in hand. Five more, and his swift strokes had carried him out of gunshot. Luckily for the lads, all the guns had been laid in the bottom of the canoes and the savages were powerless to do anything. One indeed sprang into the water and tried by dint of wonderful swimming to catch up with the fugitives; but soon seeing the futility of the plan, changed his mind and returned to shore, where he joined his companions in giving vent to dismal howls of disappointment and rage.

The three lads now feeling themselves safe relaxed their exertions and proceeded slowly up the river. Presently the glare of the fire disappeared and thus the last sign of their recent captors was shut out from their sight, as they hoped, for ever.

Although they were cold from their recent wetting, the regular exercise of arm and muscle soon tended to produce in their bodies a pleasurable warmth, while the feeling of freedom from captivity and the thought of their recent

lucky escape gave an exhilaration to their minds that prevented them from suffering any discomfort. This state of affairs lasted until the earliest streaks of dawn warned them of approaching day. Accordingly they landed on the opposite side of the river from that on which the Indian encampment had been located, thus placing the stream and some leagues of distance between themselves and the enemy.

After a hearty meal from the stores found in one of the canoes, which they carefully hid, they threw themselves down on a spot protected on all sides by dense undergrowth, and, worn out with the fatigues of the night, were sound asleep inside two minutes. Dawn brightened into full day and the sun climbed its steep appointed path until its position announced to a woodman's practised eye the hour of noon. Yet the three sleepers had not stirred once. Just then a ray of sunlight penetrating from above fell full on François' face. The brightness roused his sluggish senses and he sat up for an instant, preparatory to turning over for further rest after giving a glance about to see if all was well. As he did so, he gave an involuntary cry of alarm as he beheld standing immovable before him some ten paces off the sinewy figure of Winnatoka, while squatting on their haunches near by with their own guns balanced on their knees were three of his dusky companions.

CHAPTER VII

WHEREIN FRANÇOIS TURNS A TRICK AND ANOTHER DANGER IS AVOIDED

FRANÇOIS' fervid ejaculation had that in it that penetrated the consciousness of the other two, who instantly sat bolt upright, feeling instinctively for their guns, which were gone. In an instant their eyes, although heavy with sleep, told them that they were again captives. François, in addition, realized how the present calamity had come about. The redskins had separated into two bands, three swimming across the river and ascending the east bank, while the others had continued up the western shore. They had counted on the youths bivouacing for the day, and it was thus only a matter of time and careful search of the forest as they went before one party or the other was bound to come up with them. François was sorry that they had not risked the chance of being seen and pushed on by daylight, or else had gone a league or more away from the river for their resting place; but regrets were useless. What was now necessary for them to do was to face their new dangers with as great fortitude as possible.

Winnatoka, when he saw that the boys were awake, advanced a few steps and addressed them gravely:

"Why did Little Hunter and his friends leave us so suddenly last night? In their haste they carried away the canoes and guns of Winnatoka and the other chiefs. Perhaps they forgot whose they were. But that is nothing, they have been found and it will not happen again. Rise, my friends, and follow me, you must be hungry after your long sleep."

Although his manner was friendly and his words fair, yet the boys could detect a quiet sarcasm in his tone, and from his eyes there shot now and then a gleam of hatred that filled them with new fears. They obeyed his command while the other savages fell in noiselessly behind them. On emerging from their place of concealment, they found the remaining redskin of the band busily engaged in making a fire, a task in which he had just succeeded, and beheld the three canoes, which they had so carefully hidden, drawn up on the shore. These preparations indicated that the savages had no intention of proceeding at once upon their journey. This condition of affairs and the looks of mingled exultation and hatred which the Indians threw upon their helpless prisoners filled François with intense anxiety. After eating, at a sign from Winnatoka, the boys' ankles were once more bound, but their arms were left free. Four of the redskins lay down and were soon asleep. The fifth remained awake to watch. In order to guard against his succumbing to fatigue in spite of himself, he remained standing, gun in hand, some ten yards distant, alert to catch every sound and detect any movement of the captives.

The boys were thus unable to communicate with one another by ordinary means. François was, however, not to be baulked by circumstances; but by alternately opening and closing the forefinger of one hand, held so as to be concealed from the sight of the sentry, he utilized the sign language which they had learned in the early days of their "Brotherhood" two years previously. By this means he was able to outline a plan that had occurred to him in the midst of the despair that had settled down upon them all.

"We have small chance of escape," he signed. "They mean mischief this time. There is no need of all perishing. If the chance arrives and our ankles are freed for a moment, Pierre and I will each embrace the nearest redskin and wrestle with him. This will engage two of them and cause a momentary confusion. Jean must seize this moment to make a dash for liberty. If this is after dark, he can get a few seconds' start and slip into the river and by floating with the current and swimming have a good chance of escaping. Pierre and I will do what we can. If we die

and Jean manages to reach Quebec, your father will not be utterly bereaved."

Jean replied with an emphatic " No ! " repeated several times.

Pierre joined in urging him to carry out this plan, but the younger brother was just as decided in his refusal.

" Say no more," he signalled. " I will not sneak off and leave you to your fate. If we cannot all escape, I shall stay and share it with you." As if to end the discussion, he then turned over on his side, with his back to the others, and lay motionless, feigning sleep.

The afternoon shadows lengthened and the sun sank slowly out of sight behind the forest. The boys watched the dying light, believing in their hearts that this was their last sunset. As the twilight gradually advanced, the sleeping forms about the fire stirred, awoke, and moved about the camp. When it was finally dark, Winnatoka stretched himself lazily before the comfortable blaze once more after giving the others an inaudible command. In obedience, two of the Indians approached Jean and Pierre and dragged them to neighbouring trees, where they were securely bound. François, however, was treated differently. The fastenings about his ankles were loosened so that he could take steps about six inches in length. He was then bidden to follow one of the savages to the canoes, which he proceeded to unload, handing his prisoner the various articles to carry to the fireside. François undertook this menial task cheerfully, all the while revolving in his mind an idea that suddenly occurred to him. The work was of necessity done in a leisurely fashion because of his hobbling gait, while considerable time was consumed, for the distance from the water's edge to the fire was some sixty yards and up quite a declivity. He would thus have been able, unobserved, to hide a knife or similar small weapon about his person had he laid his hands upon one ; but the opportunity of thus arming himself was lacking, as his task-master took charge of all the small articles himself.

When this work was done, he was allowed to sit down beside the fire and hold himself in readiness for further labours. The savages, after laying the firearms and powder to one side, proceeded to feast upon the eatables before

them. The two brothers were neglected, but occasional bits of food were thrown to François, who ate them submissively, his desire being to avoid stirring up the slumbering animosity of his captors.

Finally, when the substantial meal had disappeared, he was ordered to bring up a small keg of brandy similar to the one produced the previous evening, which had been hidden beneath the other stores in the bow of the large canoe. One of the redskins accompanied him reluctantly and stood a dozen paces off while François got the desired beverage from its hiding place. It must have been tightly wedged in, for he spent some time leaning over the canoe in his search. This delay cost him the ill-will of his companion, who advanced toward him with an angry word and a menacing air. He was met by a sunny smile, however, as the boy finally arose from his stooping posture with the prize clasped tightly in one arm. This smile did not entirely die away from his features after the return to the group that impatiently awaited his arrival. His services being no longer in demand, he was led to a tree and secured in the same manner as his companions had been. As he passed Pierre, the latter was astonished at seeing him wink his left eye in the most cheerful manner.

The captives being thus secured, the Indians, each with a small gourd in his hand, gathered about the keg, which was jealously guarded by Winnatoka. The gourds were quickly filled and as quickly emptied. The first draught finished, the gourds were refilled and the contents sipped more slowly. In a few moments the first effects of the liquor were seen. The savages lost their taciturn frame of mind and conversed freely with one another, throwing many malevolent glances in the direction of the prisoners. They were evidently discussing plans for their disposal.

The gourds were now emptied a second time. Before more of the beverage was imbibed, three of the Indians arose and passed into the forest, returning in a few moments with armfuls of dead leaves and dry underbush, which were piled about the feet of each captive. This action froze the blood of the brothers with te ror; the most horrible form of death—that by burning—was to be their fate. François, although his smile had died away, did not seem

"HE WAS SURPRISED TO BEHOLD HIS ENEMY STOP."

at all dismayed, but watched the actions of the savages with secret exultation, as he saw the time they were consuming in gathering the wood. The three returned for a second load and yet a third. This was deemed sufficient for their purpose and they then rejoined their companions for another dram or two.

The boys were now breathless with suspense, knowing that it was only a matter of a few minutes before the brands would be applied and the last scene of the savage orgy begun. They had not long to wait, for Winnatoka, who had been greedily gulping down the brandy while these arrangements were being made, arose unsteadily and seizing a pine branch held it in the fire until it was well ablaze. He then started with a lurching gait in the direction of Jean, his face distorted by a look of devilish hate, a look made all the more visible and repulsive by the glare of the now brightly burning torch. Jean was unable to gaze upon his approach unmoved but gave a fearful cry of terror as he involuntarily struggled to free himself, and closed his eyes. He opened them again the next instant and was surprised to behold his enemy stop, drop the firebrand, then stagger and sink drowsily to the ground before him. As he fell, his body lay across the blazing brand, the fire from which quickly reached his skin, burning him terribly. He moaned and made a slight convulsive movement as though to draw away from the source of pain, but his muscles quickly relaxed and he settled down upon the flame as though unconscious of its heat.

One of the braves, seeing this accident, gave a feeble shout, and slowly and with much effort gained his feet, but pitched immediately forward into the midst of the camp fire and lay immobile as a log of wood, while the tongues of flame licked his form in a fierce embrace. Of the remainder, two fell back unconscious, while the third, after making one weak effort to pull his comrade from the fire, sank down with a groan, and lay still like the rest, breathing slowly as one in a deep slumber.

When this occurred François gave a shout of triumph.

"I knew it would happen," he called to his companions. "I drugged their brandy. Cheer up, *mes amis*, the coast is now clear, if we can only get loose. They are good for

a twelve-hour sleep, so we can make all the noise we want. Some of them may never wake up."

The three now busied themselves in trying to free their hands. Jean and Pierre were powerless to accomplish anything. François, whose captor, eager to get back to the group surrounding the brandy keg, had been a little careless in fastening him, was able to rub the connecting length of vine which bound his hands behind the tree, so that its friction against the bark would in a short time wear it through. He struggled manfully for a quarter-of-an-hour and was at last successful. It took but a few strokes of a knife, which he found on one of the prostrate forms, to liberate his companions, who still seemed a little dazed at the turn events had taken.

"Come!" cried François, after giving them a moment or two to regain command over themselves, "time is precious. There is no telling how many savages are now creeping toward us, attracted by this camp fire."

Each one accordingly picked up whatever was handiest—guns, ammunition, paddles, or food—and placed them in the largest canoe. Within five minutes it was launched and the three lads set out, paddling away like mad, while, towing behind them, trailed the two smaller craft. When the middle of the river was reached, these were brought alongside, a hole cut in their bottoms, and they were allowed to sink. The large canoe with its occupants then disappeared in the darkness, leaving the scene of their recent peril silent save for the slow, stertorous breathing of the savages and the melancholy hoot of an owl who sat in a distant tree top overlooking with blinking eyes the deserted camp.

As the boys proceeded on their way, François related the particulars of the trick whereby their escape was effected.

"While standing in the crowd awaiting our embarkation at Quebec, your Uncle Ormesson approached me and whispered: 'Take good care of my boys and do not run into needless danger. Should you fall into the hands of the redskins, here is a white powder I got in Paris that may aid you. Put it in the savages' meat or drink, and they will fall asleep shortly and not awaken for a dozen hours

or more. May Heaven bless you ! ' With these words he slipped a tiny parchment packet into my hand which I carefully stowed away in my waterproof belt and promptly forgot all about. It suddenly recalled itself to my mind when I was ordered to bring the brandy from the canoe. I managed to get it out, remove the plug in the keg, and empty its contents into the liquor while leaning over and pretending to search for the stuff."

" Bravo ! " cried Pierre, as his friend ceased his narration. " It was a clever idea, cleverly done."

" How like Uncle Ormesson to endeavour to provide against our needs ! " murmured Jean thoughtfully. " Although separated from us by many leagues, his kindly efforts have succeeded. I will warrant his thoughts held us and our safety in mind to-night. I believe he loves us as much as though he were really our father."

The boys hurried on until dawn, then, not fearing pursuit, knowing that the brains of their recent captors would still be befuddled with the powerful drug, they landed, hid their canoe, and seeking a place of concealment sought a few hours' rest. They awoke about noon, refreshed but hungry. They were dismayed to find that in the hurry of their departure the previous night they had brought little or no provisions. After eating what they were able to find in the canoe, it was determined to spend the remainder of the day in restocking their larder.

Fearing lest the sound of firearms might bring down upon them any straggling band of redskins that were still watching the river, they plunged into the forest and made their way westward. After a couple of hours' progress, they deemed it safe to use their guns. Accordingly Jean knocked over a couple of rabbits, which he carelessly crowded into his pockets to get them out of the way. Other game was lacking, and they were compelled to go further than they had originally intended. They finally came to a small stream along whose bank innumerable tracks showed that it was a favourite drinking place for deer and other wild animals. Posting themselves in a sheltered position, they waited for the arrival of some thirsty inhabitant of the woods. They had not tarried long before a crackling was heard in the underbush across

the brook, and after a few moments a deer appeared. He stopped an instant to sniff the air before drinking. Fortunately what breeze was stirring came from his direction and he suspected no danger. Descending into the stream and standing with his forelegs in the cool water, he buried his nose beneath the surface in sheer enjoyment. Once more looking around to see that all was well, he settled down to the gratification of his thirst, when a sound made by one of the hidden lads caused him to raise his head in alarm. François motioned to Pierre to fire. The shot was not a mortal one, and the terror-stricken, wounded animal sprang back toward the shelter of the woods. François' bullet, however, was too quick for him and he sank down with a plaintive moan.

The boys then busied themselves in cutting choice portions of the flesh, which were rolled up in a piece of hide and swung across François' sturdy shoulders. By the time this was accomplished the sun had set and the three made haste to return. The woods through which they first passed were more or less open, so they were able to cover the ground of this part of their journey rapidly enough. Suddenly, as the darkness deepened, a far-off distant cry was heard, then another, and another, sounding in the direction from which they had just come.

"Wolves!" remarked François, and there was a shade of anxiety in his voice. "They have scented the carcass of the deer. I hope it is only a small pack that will remain satisfied with what we left behind and not dog our path for more."

The cries soon ceased and the three pushed hopefully on. A few minutes later the howling was heard again, but much more distinctly.

"We must hasten," cried François, "they are on our track."

Despite their best endeavours the boys realized by the approaching sounds that their pursuers were gaining on them. The night, which had now fallen, was cold and clear. A young moon gleamed above, which cast a feeble light in the forest. This helped their progress very much, and they hoped to be able to reach the river before they would be over-taken. At length Pierre, turning appre-

hensively and looking backward, saw a multitude of fiery eyeballs like fireflies darting about among the distant trees. A clearing was reached and crossed and the party halted a moment on the edge of the forest on its farther side. The pack, with true cowardly instinct, hesitated to enter the open but stopped and gave vent to their feelings by hoarse cries. The boys could see their dark forms skirting the trees and counted over twenty. This was a formidable number, for although they could kill some of them, yet the fierce beasts were liable to make a rush in a body before they could reload, an event that would be highly disastrous to their hope of being able to continue their journey.

Gradually the skulking forms gathered courage and began a stealthy advance into the open place. By degrees they separated, forming a crescent-shaped compact body that continually spread in both directions. The river was less than a league away: but should they turn their backs and attempt to make a dash for it, the merciless pack would be upon them pell-mell and pull them down before they had gone a hundred yards. François bethought himself of the deer meat that had already cost them so much labour. He undid the package and tossed a piece toward the pack. Instantly they were upon it in a confused, snarling, fighting mass. Another piece fell in their midst with like results. The boys hoped that this supply would take the edge off their voracious appetites. Vain was this trust, for after the last piece had disappeared, the wild creatures stood with panting breasts and lolling tongues eager for more. In fact, the meat just devoured seemed to stimulate their courage, for the next advance toward their three victims, although slow, was steady.

The lads, each with his back against a tree, stood with gun primed, ready for the final onslaught. Already had the pack increased its pace; already was the sound of their breathing audible—when suddenly a crashing was heard in the woods at the right, and a magnificent buck broke from cover and with leaps augmented by fear started across the clearing. Instantly the wo ves scented new and less dangerous game. So with one united snarl they sprang upon the deer, who in his terror had run into the very middle of the pack. Surprised he was, but not faint-

hearted, for with lowered antlers he quickly ripped one wolf open, and by a quick movement of his fine head another of his foes was tossed writhing to the ground ten yards away; but in spite of his gallant struggle the number of his enemies was too great. They assailed him on right flank and left, from beneath and behind until the noble animal sank under their combined onslaught.

The boys, surprised at the sudden appearance of the buck, remained rooted to the spot, passive spectators of the fray. François was the first to recover his mental alertness. Wondering what had been the original cause of the beast's terror, he looked toward the wood whence he had come. As he gazed intently, three human forms glided from the depths and stood on the edge of the clearing a moment surveying the scene. The moonlight fell upon their naked bodies and made them glisten. With a low word of warning, "Indians!" and a gesture in their direction, François urged his companions to start at once for their destination, trusting to the noise of the wolves to cover any sound their departure might make. An hour later they had reached the river, launched their canoe, and were busily engaged in stealing along the shore in the protection of its friendly shadows with nothing to show for the afternoon's hard work but the memory of an exciting experience and the two rabbits still stuffed in Jean's pocket.

CHAPTER VIII

DESCRIBES HOW A PURPOSE WAS ACCOMPLISHED AND AN UNPLEASANT PREDICAMENT MET

WHEN a league or two had been passed by vigorous, though noiseless paddling, the three boys began to breathe more easily.

"Phew! but that was a narrow escape," finally exclaimed Pierre in a whisper. "The wolves would have been on us in another moment. Ugh! I can hear their snarls and the clicking of their jaws and see their eyes all ablaze, even now."

"A few seconds longer," replied François in an undertone, "and we should have had to use our guns. That would have brought a fiercer enemy about our ears than any pack of wolves."

"We certainly owe a debt of gratitude to the buck for coming when he did," chimed in the youngest of the party. "For my part, the next time I am about to shoot a deer, I shall remember his service and refuse to pull the trigger. In that way our obligation will be cancelled."

The other two smiled at Jean's childish thought but said nothing, although they felt in secret sympathy with it. Conversation soon ceased, each one busied with his own thoughts. When dawn came they breakfasted on the few crumbs they had left and, after a plunge in the river, decided to proceed boldly by daylight, as they all felt a strong desire to put a long distance between themselves and the scene of the past night. It was arranged that two should paddle and allow the third to sleep. In this way they would be making continuous progress day and night and would avoid falling into danger by a protracted landing.

At noon they went on shore, quickly cooked the two rabbits and hastened to get afloat again, waiting until then before they satisfied their hunger. The next day they landed again and, leaving Jean on guard, the other two stole into the forest. As luck would have it, they soon came upon a deer, which was brought down by François' steady aim. A plentiful supply of meat was thus secured and a hurried retreat made without molestation. Some hours later a low, cleared point of land was chosen on which a fire was built and a quantity of food cooked in safety, sufficient to last them for two days.

Thus they sped onward in their course, without mishap or annoyance. The country through which they passed gave no signs of having ever felt the hand of man, white or red. It was indeed a primeval wilderness. An unbroken forest lined the river on each side, silent in the day save for the crackling of twigs beneath the feet of timid deer surprised while in the act of drinking by the noiseless approach of the canoe, and after dark a strange, weird shadow from whose depths there arose the sound of night birds and the cry of prowling beasts of prey, hungry and in search of food. By day a land of sunshine and peace; by night a region of mystery and one of pain and conflict among its four-footed inhabitants.

No trace of savages was seen, although all three were alert to discover some sign of the enemy. Emboldened by this state of affairs, they landed one day and concealing their canoe behind the branches of an overarching tree, proceeded to stretch their legs, cramped from so long kneeling or sitting in one position. The relief was so grateful that they lay down upon the ground to rest for several hours, although not daring to sleep. They were thus lazily engaged when Jean's quick ear caught an unusual sound. At his gesture all became silent. The noise was repeated from the direction of the river; it was the low guttural tones of redskins conversing. The boys stretched low, peered out through the screening branches and beheld a canoe passing. In it were three Indians. They were hastening on, unconscious of observation, their muscles standing out beautifully as they paddled, while they exchanged an occasional word without interfering with their

progress. The one in the stern was lighter in complexion than the rest. While passing he unconsciously turned his head toward the shore and the three hidden pairs of eyes had a good look at his face. An instant, and the canoe with its dusky load was gone. The boys did not move for some minutes. Then, drawing a long breath, they looked at one another and exclaimed in unison:

"The Rat!"

"He is hot on our trail," exclaimed Pierre excitedly. "He probably followed our expedition at a distance and, when he met it returning, learned that we had decided to push on. He has picked up two companions on the way. If I mistake not, the one in front was Winnatoka. His burns were not severe enough evidently to prevent his doing a good day's work with the paddle."

"To think that he has got the start of us!" wailed Jean in despair. "There will be no furs left when we find the hiding place. If we only hadn't to go to Michilimackinac!"

"The question is whether he is going after the furs now or is making for Michilimackinac also," was François' level-headed answer. "He may have some end in view in frightening the trappers with tales of the perils attending the passage of the Ottawa. We must hasten, after giving him a good start, and try to reach the island as soon as possible after he does. Perhaps we shall pass him to-night in the dark. We must keep a sharp look-out for any signs of a camp fire."

A further wait of two hours ensued, then they proceeded cautiously. Despite all their care they saw no more traces of 'The Rat' and his companions on the way. Finally the long portage at the headwaters of the Ottawa was made in safety and they exchanged the confines of the river for the broad expanse of Lake Huron. They skirted the shores of this great body of water for several days until finally, far off like a tiny dark cloud, they beheld the island of Michilimackinac. The sight stirred them to renewed efforts, and early one afternoon they drew near to the pebbly beach and landed.

"The Fairy Isle," as the Indians called it, was the westernmost post of New France. Its importance was

immense, and a company of soldiers in command of a competent officer was always kept there. A place of beauty it was, unexcelled in all this wilderness, with its bright sun above it, the flashing blue of its surrounding waters, and the distant view of land in all directions half hidden amid the purple haze of the horizon. But it was not for its lovely surroundings, its wooded surface, or its commanding bluffs, admirable from a military point of view, that it was so highly prized. It was for its situation. Here at the meeting point almost of three great lakes, was a convenient gathering place for dealings with the Indian tribes of a vast region, a country that France was slowly and fitfully trying to make her own. Here stopped the *coureurs-de-bois*, the hardy hunters, on their way to the settlements with their season's bounty of furs. Congregating at this point in force, they then set off on the long journey just made by the three boys. A month late in starting this year because of the reported Indian ambuscades along the Ottawa, a larger number than usual were collected, gaming, carousing, fretting at the delay, hoping for some favourable event to happen that would enable them to start on their way.

On the heights stood the little fort with its strong stockade, the home of the lonesome soldiers. Beneath lay a collection of Indian huts, housing representatives of a dozen different tribes, come hither to barter skins for the goods of the white man, especially brandy. Along the beach were a row of canoes drawn high up, belonging to the waiting *coureurs-de-bois*. Beneath them their owners slept, save a few who had taken the trouble to erect fragile tents or huts of bark. Some two hundred of these lawless men in idleness were sufficient to keep the place in an uproar, so much so that vigorous complaints were annually made by the few priests who in their missionary zeal had braved the dangers and hardships of the wilderness and established a mission for the Indians. These complaints, however, had passed unheeded. It was into this sort of a community that the boys found themselves cast.

Their arrival was greeted with vociferous applause from the crowd, and they were straightway assailed by a hundred questions in one breath. Waving them aside with a good-

humoured deprecating gesture, François asked that they be conducted to the Commandant of the Fort. This request was acceded to by the *coureurs-de-bois*, who placed the newcomers' canoe in safe keeping and then forming a procession marched the boys up to the Fort, all the time singing a spirited *chanson*. On ascending the hill they found the Commandant, aroused by the approaching noise, at the gateway of the stockade. He was a well-built, burly-looking man, every inch a soldier, one born to command, and an excellent officer for his work of keeping control of the rather mixed and at times turbulent population of the island.

"Well, my good fellows," he exclaimed in a rough yet kindly tone as his eyes fell upon the lads in the front of the crowd, "whom have we here and what is their business?"

The boys saluted, and Pierre, acting as spokesman, replied:

"Scouts, in the King's service, and bearers of a letter from Lieutenant Viger, the leader of the expedition that started but turned back. Also the bearers of the good news that the Ottawa is cleared of savages. We have just come through. If three boys can make the passage, the fur fleet two hundred strong can surely pass in safety."

On hearing these words the crowd shouted until the boys' ears were nearly deafened. The Commandant raised a quieting hand and the tumult subsided.

"These are brave words," he replied, as he took the proffered letter, "and true ones I hope, although at variance with the report brought yesterday by three friendly Indians who declare the woods and banks to be alive with waiting savages. However," he added with a smile, "they may be lying knaves like their kind. You are brave lads to have made a journey, the dangers and fears of which have turned an armed expedition of soldiers back. I would believe the word of three white men against that of three redskins any day."

A muffled cheer arose which quickly died away, as the crowd saw the Commandant open the letter and begin to read. When he finished, he smiled.

"It is as I have thought all along, these lines from Lieutenant Viger and your own testimony prove it to my satis-

faction." Then raising his voice until the farthest spectator could hear him distinctly he cried: "The way is clear. *mes amis*, and safe and waiting for you."

A chorus of yells greeted these words and the *coureurs-de-bois*, without waiting to hear more, rushed pell-mell down the hill to the beach again.

Declining an invitation from the Commandant to spend the night within the Fort, the boys repaired to the water's edge once more to look after their canoe and its contents.

The *coureurs-de-bois*, wishing to show their appreciation of the news brought by the young scouts, placed the finest tent on the beach at their disposal and insisted on making a feast in their honour. The boys, accustomed as they had been to rough fare during the past few weeks, were glad to avail themselves of this opportunity to taste well-cooked food once more. Their healths were drunk on all sides, and when they left the festive throng to seek rest and seclusion in their tent it was with a friendly cheer from a hundred throats ringing in their ears.

The freedom from anxiety, coupled with their natural fatigue, caused them to fall asleep early. Their tent was situated some distance from the revellers, the noise of whose jollification reached their ears but faintly. Finally even this din ceased as the night wore on and silence brooded over the island save for the sentry's call at the Fort and the occasional yelp of a sleepy cur in the Indian village.

It was past two o'clock when a dark human form emerged from the general obscurity and crept catlike toward the tent containing the sleeping youths. As it drew near, the figure dropped on hands and knees and crawled cautiously to the door or flap. It stopped to listen in order to determine if it could hear the sounds of all three sleepers. Having made sure of this, it went to one side and with a sharp knife made a slit in the tent wall large enough to admit a human arm. Again did the figure listen until it was satisfied that one of the sleepers was close at hand. Reaching in through the hole as far as possible, the would-be assassin stabbed viciously with the knife a number of times in various directions. A cry arose from the interior that caused him to withdraw his arm and steal away with a malignant smile on his face.

The cry came from Jean's lips. During his sleep he had tossed about and finally rolled to the outer edge of the pile of boughs that constituted his bed. Just as the murderous hand was about to descend upon him he stirred and gave one more roll that landed him on the ground with a bump. He awakened immediately in alarm, dimly conscious of the noise made by the knife as it was plunged among the boughs where he had been lying. This sound together with his sudden fall made him realize that something unusual had happened and elicited from him the cry that had given so much joy to the figure outside the tent. François and Pierre were of course aroused, and after a word of explanation from Jean rushed into the open air. Although they listened carefully and made a thorough search of the near neighbourhood, they found nothing to account for Jean's fright. The remainder of the night François stayed on watch, but nothing further of an alarming character transpired.

When they arose in the morning, the slit above the spot where Jean had been sleeping told the whole story.

"The Rat!" exclaimed Pierre.

"Winnatoka!" cried his brother.

"Either!" commented François.

The next day was spent by the *coureurs-de-bois* in preparing for the journey which was to be begun on the following morning at daybreak. The boys whiled away the forenoon wandering about the Indian village in hopes of seeing one or the other of their redskin enemies but without success. Finally, after their midday meal they set out to explore for themselves the beauties of the island. Together they strolled over its surface, now plunging through dense thickets, now coming out upon a pebbly beach. All game had long ago been exterminated, so the single gun which they had brought along, out of mere habit, was of no use. The glimpses caught every little while of the sparkling water and the cloudless sky were so beautiful that they could not repress many and varied ejaculations of admiration.

Having gradually skirted the shore in their walk, they found themselves at the further side of the island. Here one of those curious works that Nature sometimes leaves

behind for man's wonder attracted their attention. From the water a hundred feet below the edge of the cliff on which they stood there arose a column of rock some twelve feet square at the top, on which stood a solitary pine, tall and straight but dead, its life worn out with years of struggle in its exposed position with the elements, or perhaps smitten with the forked stroke of the lightning. This column of stone stood separated from the mainland by a distance of twenty feet. Below were jagged rocks on one side, while on the other the shallow waves of the lake bathed its base. By some lucky chance a tree had fallen from the cliff, its further end resting on the top of the rocky column, thus spanning the abyss and affording a tolerably safe means of passage.

One at a time the boys with youthful daring passed over and stretched themselves out with their backs against the stricken pine, giving themselves up to a period of rest and contemplation. Far off the hazy shores of the mainland were visible, while the eye following the windings of the coast could barely catch a glimpse of the fort and its encircling stockade. The wind had died down until not a ripple stirred the glassy surface of the lake at their feet. A solitary cloud, fleecy and slow sailing, obtruded itself against the wide, blue expanse of the heavens. Behind them in the woods not a bird note was heard. Silence and peace pervaded everything.

This quiet state of nature exerted its influence over the lads as they looked with dreamy eyes upon the scene before them. No word was spoken; no movement made as in fancy their thoughts flew abroad throughout the world. They were so bound by the spell of the time and the place that they did not hear a light footfall on the edge of the woods nor see a crafty, swarthy face peer cautiously out from the shade. With noiseless step its owner approached the fragile bridge as though to cross and creep upon the boys unawares, but instead he stopped, and crouching down, seized the end of the prostrate tree at his feet and with a mighty muscular exertion moved it a few inches. Another tug and the whole trunk fell crashing into the depths below. The noise brought all three to their feet, and they turned in time to catch a glimpse of 'The Rat'

disappearing among the trees. François angrily lifted his gun to his shoulder, but Pierre laid a restraining hand upon his arm :

" No," he said firmly, " although he is our enemy, he is also related to Jean and me. I would not have his life taken except in self-defence."

The elder lad scowled a second, then his face cleared and he laughed :

" Here's a fine fix to be in ! None of us can jump twenty feet to safety and we are likely to stay here without food or drink until rescued. I doubt, though, with all the confusion of the departure of the *coureurs-de-bois*, whether we are missed at all."

Jean's face fell as he surveyed the gulf between them and the cliff.

" The fleet will start off without us," he groaned, " and I did so want their company."

The sun by this time was fast disappearing behind the trees on the cliff. François' brow clouded.

" This is not the most comfortable place in which to spend the night. One would hardly dare to sleep for fear he might roll off." Then he added with forced gaiety as he peered over the edge : " I fear if one did he would get a harder bump than Jean received last night."

All three now took counsel as to the means best suited to rescue themselves from their predicament, but without avail. The rock was too high and precipitous for them to descend without a rope. The intervening gap could not be leaped. At length Jean looked upward with a smile as he said :

" We have nothing to do but to grow wings and fly." His glance heavenward finally rested on the tree, their sole companion on the rock. His eyes kindled as he exclaimed, " I have it ! We must chop this pine down and make it fall in the right direction. Then we will have a bridge like there was before."

Pierre sniffed disdainfully at the suggestion.

" I suppose you have a couple of axes and a saw or two in your pocket to do the work with," was his reply.

" No," answered Jean, " but François there has an Indian hatchet in his belt."

François hastily produced the weapon.

"*Certainement!*" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten this. I fear it will prove but a toy for our purpose. Better to try, though, than to sit still."

So saying, he approached the farther side of the trunk and after measuring with his eye the direction in which he wished the tree to fall, he began chipping away the wood. After working some time and making slow progress, Pierre took his place and was relieved in turn by Jean. Twilight fell and small results had been obtained. After dark they continued their labour, although more slowly and working by sense of touch rather than by sight. All through the night they chipped in turn, stopping only when the hatchet became too warm. Inch by inch they cut toward the heart of the forest monarch towering above them. The first gleams of day found them still busy. The hours sped on. The sun came up from the watery east and found them struggling manfully. At last a warning creak told them that the end was near. Mournfully the tree groaned as its vitals were thus persistently attacked. Its topmost branches quivered as though in pain. Finally the last blow was struck and François sprang back to safety, as with a mighty crash the giant fell. His judgment had been true, for as it lay prostrate, still quivering in its last agony, it formed a perfect bridge. Pierre insisted that he be allowed to make the first test of its strength. He passed over in safety. Then Jean followed, and François came last.

Halfway to the Fort they obtained a view of the lake that showed its surface dotted with the tiny boats of the *coureurs-de-bois* already started on their long journey.

CHAPTER IX

CONCERNS A LOST POWDER BARREL

THE first thing the boys did on reaching the beach was to look for their canoe. It was gone. During the excitement of embarking, some one among the *coureurs-de-bois* had quietly appropriated it, or, what was more likely, their redskin enemies had made off with it, hoping by so doing to delay their plans. The guns and ammunition they found intact in the place where they had left them. Jean was visibly cast down at their new misfortune. Pierre, however, although his eyes flashed, remained calm.

"We must see the Commandant at once. He will surely help us," he said.

Accordingly they climbed the hill to the Fort and presented themselves before that astonished official, who had supposed, of course, that they had left with the fleet. Pierre briefly related their last night's experience on the rock, touched upon some of the adventures they had had upon the way, and ended by requesting in the light of their recent services that they be provided with the means of making their return trip.

The Commandant listened to the recital with good-humoured interest.

"*Ma foi!*" he exclaimed with animation. "You are indeed beset by a crafty enemy. If I ever catch 'The Rat' at Michilimackinac again, I shall remember the trials he has caused you and shall order him hanged to the nearest tree for crows to peck at and as a warning to all evildoers. Your request is a reasonable one. Surely the Colony owes you anything it can afford to pay for making it possible

for the fleet to reach Montreal in safety. I, too, am under obligations to you for being the means of ridding me of a host of turbulent fellows, who, although well meaning, the most of them, are indeed a source of annoyance to one who loves order and tranquillity on this island."

The three thanked him for his good will and after bidding him a final farewell repaired once more to the beach to await the arrival of the assistance promised. Within an hour or so one of the soldiers approached and led them to a spot where two medium-sized canoes were ready for launching. Each contained a quantity of provisions, together with some extra ammunition.

"With the compliments of the Commandant and wishes for a safe journey. Adieu, messieurs!"

With these words the soldier saluted, bowed, and left them in possession of his superior's gift.

"What beauties they are!" cried Jean in admiration.

"Yes, and see how much stronger than those we are accustomed to," was Pierre's comment.

"These were never made by any tribes with whom we have ever come in contact," François added, as he examined them critically. "They have probably come from the western end of these great lakes. They are lighter and yet roomier and stronger than those made by our eastern savages and will easily carry the five hundred skins at this moment waiting to be discovered on our way home."

Without further delay, the lads shoved their newly acquired craft into the water, François entering one while the two brothers occupied the other. They soon learned that the canoes responded quickly to their paddle strokes, as they sped swiftly over the dancing water of the lake. The few days of rest had put them in good trim for this familiar exercise, and as the blood of health hurried through their veins their spirits rose, the memories of the past weeks of danger and distress vanished as a dream of yesterday, while the anticipation of the final accomplishment of their mysterious errand produced in them a buoyant mood and added zest to all their efforts.

It would have taken but a short time for them to have caught up with the fleet, although the latter had some six hours' start. It was decided, however, that it would

be better for their purpose if they lagged behind. By so doing ' The Rat ' would be kept in ignorance of their quick deliverance from the predicament in which he had left them and would thus rid them of the necessity of contending any further with him, at least for a time. Accordingly, after the first spurt, they settled down to more leisurely strokes.

The weather was propitious for their journey. The light breeze blew cool and invigorating about them, tempered in some measure by the rays of the spring sun that brought in its increased warmth promise of summer days to come. The surface of the lake, but slightly ruffled by the wind, gave little resistance to their rapid progress. The world seemed at peace around them ; no sign of smoke or human habitation was visible to landward, while their sole companions on the wide expanse of waters were the gulls that wheeled in ever-varying circles above their heads or skimmed the surface of the lake with watchful eye, darting downward now and then, to rise again with screams of triumph and much flapping of strong wings as they bore off a hapless fish to be devoured at leisure on the distant shore. The island of Michilimackinac receded gradually from their sight until at length it disappeared in a blue haze behind them.

Toward dusk they drew near shore and landed, boldly building a camp fire to relieve the chill that came from the lake after the sun went down. The conversation naturally touched upon their present errand, its dangers and the difficulties that were likely to be met.

" I, for one, do not think we shall have much trouble in locating our treasure," observed Pierre, " provided ' The Rat ' and his cutthroat crew do not arrive at the spot too long ahead of us."

François thought for a moment before replying, as he drew the copy of the mysterious drawing from his damp-proof belt and spread it out before the fire.

" The key to the location of the store of skins lies in this long, narrow island shown here," he explained, as the brothers crowded close to study the chart. " I observed very carefully on our journey up the Ottawa, and nowhere did I see an island of this shape, long and narrow. This

fact makes me confident that the river drawn here is not the main stream, but one of its tributaries."

"But there may be forty of them," cried Jean, in dismay. "It would take us the whole summer to explore them all. In the mean time 'The Rat' would have found and removed the furs and have them safely hidden in Montreal, if not actually sold."

"That would unfortunately be true," replied François, "had we not another clue to guide us. You see at the top of the map there is an island. What more reasonable than to suppose it is meant to represent Michilimackinac, the place where all the trappers collect before starting for Montreal? Just beneath are eleven suns, meaning a journey of eleven days, as your Uncle Ormesson suggested. We need therefore only to keep count of the time spent as we proceed and not bother our heads about tributaries until the eleven days are up. That narrows it down considerably."

Pierre yawned.

"What is the use of bothering with maps until we get somewhere near the region where we expect to find the skins?" he said. "We had much better spend the time in sleep."

Jean laughed assent to this practical proposition as he found that his own jaws were exhibiting tendencies similar to those of his brother. In a few moments the three were breathing leisurely, entirely lost to their surroundings. They slept thus soundly until break of day, undisturbed by the plotting of human enemies or the curiosity of their wild four-footed neighbours. After a plunge in the lake and a sharp run up and down the shore to warm the blood, they cooked some of the haunch of venison they found among the stores provided by their friend, the Commandant, and after a hearty breakfast embarked once more upon their way.

The journey was uneventful. The long portage was safely made and at length they launched their canoes upon the headwaters of the Ottawa.

At this point François called for a council of war. "It is very important," he said gravely, "that we decide upon a definite plan of action and then stick to it. We are about

to enter the enemy's country and expose ourselves to many hidden dangers. In the first place, if we press on at once after the fur fleet we are sure to run across 'The Rat' and Winnatoka, who will probably lag behind the rest and keep a good watch out for us. My advice would be to fool them by delaying our advance and thus keep them guessing as to our whereabouts and plans."

"But won't that give them time to find the furs and make off with them?" queried Jean anxiously."

"On full consideration I think not," the elder boy replied. "Undoubtedly 'The Rat' knows the identical spot where they are hidden, and can go to it at any time. I shouldn't be surprised if he was the one that assisted in hiding them in the beginning. Perhaps he it was that drew the mysterious plan for his father. If my idea is correct that it was he that stole the original parchment sheet, he did it, not that he might be able to find the skins, but in order that we should be without any clue to their hiding place. Of course, he may suspect that we have a copy because of our presence in this region, but he does not know that we have it."

"I see your scheme," exclaimed Pierre. "You want to mystify them as to where we are and what we are doing, and while they are trying to find us we will give them the slip, get the skins, and be off with them before they realize it."

"Exactly," answered François. "They will never go near the place until they know what we are up to. I believe our best move is to ascend the first tributary of the Ottawa we come to some twenty or thirty leagues, and keep out of the way for three or four days. Then on our return we can travel cautiously, and thus have a good chance of eluding them."

"I believe you are right," chimed in Jean enthusiastically. "By doing thus we may never see them, or, what is better, they may never see us."

"Another advantage of my plan," continued François, "is that we can employ our time very advantageously during these few days in getting a good supply of meat ready. You can see for yourselves that our stock of provisions is low and will not last long. When once we enter

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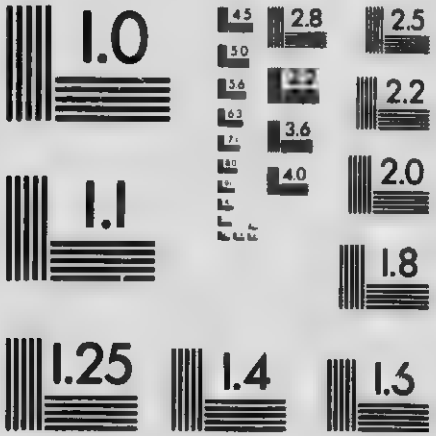

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dangerous territory we shall be unable to do any hunting, for the discharge of one gun might spoil all our schemes. Then, too, the matter of time will be very important and we could not stop to cook our food if we had it. We shall be able thus to get plenty of deer meat and smoke it before we start on the next stage of our journey."

The matter being decided the boys proceeded leisurely down the Ottawa until they came to the mouth of the first good-sized stream emptying its waters into that river. They entered this branch and went up its course for a full score of leagues.

On reaching a favourable spot they went ashore. Here they met with a great misfortune. While unloading their canoes Pierre unluckily dropped overboard the small keg of powder which the Commandant had included in his gift of stores. The three instantly stripped and dived near the spot where it had disappeared in the vain hope of recovering this valuable asset. The current, however, was both deep and strong, and after an hour's hard work they gave up the task greatly chagrined at the loss. An examination was then made of their powder horns, each of which was found to be half full. Bullets they had in plenty, but the most of them would now be useless.

After a night's rest the keen edge of their disappointment was dulled, and they faced the situation bravely.

"We must make every shot tell," was Jean's only comment.

The canoes were carefully hidden, and taking all the remaining provisions with them they entered the forest and, turning their back on the river, struck out vigorously for the interior. Here another surprise awaited them. The country which they entered, one they expected to find plentifully supplied with game, seemed destitute of every living thing. No tracks or other evidences of recent occupation by wild animals were visible. Not a bird even fluttered or sang in the branches overhead. All day long they wearily tramped without resting through an apparently deserted region. At night they discussed the strange situation but found no solution. The next morning they resumed their march with like results. Late in the afternoon they halted while François climbed a tree in the

hope of discovering signs of some near-by lake or water-course. He immediately descended in great excitement. "Quickly!" he said in a low voice. "Follow me into a hiding place."

Near at hand there stood a clump of firs and evergreens about which had grown a dense mass of underbrush, forming a fairly serviceable screen. The three entered carefully, and throwing themselves flat on the ground waited anxiously for what was about to happen. Three minutes had not elapsed before they heard the sound of breaking twigs, and on peering out discreetly between the leaves they beheld a band of some twenty Indians pass not a dozen paces away. The savages did not suspect their presence, and strode along with almost noiseless tread and were soon lost to sight.

"That was a lucky climb of mine," muttered François under his breath. "If it had not been for that we should have been prisoners this very minute."

The two brothers took long breaths of relief before asking François what he thought of the matter.

"They are evidently a hunting party," was his answer, "and are not on the warpath, for you noticed they had no war-paint on. Their luck has been the same as ours judging from their empty shoulders." Then, after a moment of thoughtful silence he added: "Although they have no game they have something else that we need, and that is powder. They have covered a long distance to-day, I think, for they walked as though they were thoroughly tired. Do you stay here until my return. Make no noise and do not worry about me for I may not get back until morning."

"What are you going to do?" asked Jean in alarm.

"Follow them and, when they are asleep, relieve them of some of their ammunition. They will sleep soundly after their day's tramp, and thus make my task a comparatively easy one."

Both of his companions begged him not to go but he was unmovable in his determination. "Something must be done," was his reply, as he prepared to leave. "It would be a pity for us to be hampered in our movements for the want of a little powder."

A moment later he glided forth, unarmed save for his hunting knife, and started after the redskins. Their trail was easy to follow and he made rapid progress. As the sun sank he slowed his pace and proceeded more carefully. Finally the odour of burning wood reached his nostrils, and he knew that he was not far from their encampment. He secreted himself until after dark, and then gradually worked his way in the direction from which the smell proceeded. Slowly and cautiously he advanced on all-fours without a sound until he caught sight of the camp fire, around which he could distinguish the seated forms of the savages. He judged that after their tiresome march they would seek rest early. This proved to be the case, for after a little he saw the redskins stretch themselves out with their feet to the fire and compose themselves for the night. The party evidently had no fear of enemies, for no sentry was stationed to keep watch, the only precautionary measure taken being the covering of the fire with ashes so that only a mild glow was suffused about the open space where they lay.

François waited a full hour after the camp had quieted down before venturing any further. Inch by inch he moved, nearer and nearer, softly and silently, like a cat making its noiseless approach toward an unsuspecting prey. Finally he entered the sleeping circle and raised himself into a standing posture so as to get as good a view of the scene as the subdued light from the fire would permit. All about him lay the sleeping forms of the savages separated from one another by a distance of not much over a yard. François, after a rapid glance around him, knelt down beside the nearest redskin. This individual had wrapped himself so tightly in his blanket as to defy even François' deft fingers, so he was obliged to pass him by in favour of his neighbour. This Indian, of gigantic stature, lay in an easy attitude only partly covered by his blanket. On lifting this, François discovered the owner's gun and powder horn lying close by his side. This latter he quietly appropriated and directed his attention to the next brave, who lay quietly sleeping, curled up, without any covering whatever, on the springy carpet of pine needles that littered the ground. His powder horn was within easy reach,

and in an instant changed ownership. The next half-dozen forms that François examined were all so tightly rolled up in their blankets that he dared not disturb them. By this time he had traversed the sleeping circle half-way. A third horn had just been secured when, by the faint light that grew momentarily dimmer, the lad was surprised to see one of the Indians on the opposite side of the fire sit up and look sleepily about him. Quick as a flash François dropped noiselessly to the ground and took his place between two of the recumbent forms. The awakened savage arose slowly and going to the fire replenished it, and, after glancing about the camp to see that all was well, resumed his bed. François waited until he thought the redskin was again asleep, when he prepared to arise and take his departure, having secured all the powder he thought necessary. Before he could move a muscle, however, he was horrified at seeing the Indian next to him stir uneasily and awaken. François lay still, breathing regularly and keeping a sharp eye upon his neighbour, his hand clasped tightly about the handle of his hunting knife ready to spring up and use this weapon if discovered, hoping in the general confusion to be able to make his escape.

The savage sat up, blinked at the fire a moment, then cast a cautious look about him. François' heart gave a jump as the redskin's eyes rested an instant upon him. Sleep and the glare of the fire, however, blinded his vision, and with a satisfied grunt he lay down again, this time with his back to his watchful neighbour, and soon his deep breathing announced his return to the land of dreams. After waiting a full half-hour longer François arose and slowly and carefully made his retreat. When he had put a half-league of distance between himself and the camp, he quickened his pace and pushed boldly on toward the point where he had left the other two boys. When he had reached the supposed vicinity of their hiding-place he gave the cry of a loon, and was rejoiced to hear an answering call. In a few minutes he had joined the rest.

"Come!" he said cheerily. "I have been successful. Let us not delay but get as far away from the enemy as possible before dawn."

The others followed obediently and the three silently

threaded the dark woods at a rapid pace. At daybreak they stopped beside a tiny spring to rest and refresh themselves. The powder horns were examined and found to be nearly full. Encouraged by this increase in their supply of ammunition they proceeded on their journey with a sharp outlook for any signs of the much-desired game.

The path they followed was not identical with that traversed the day before, but was in the same general direction. As the hours passed they experienced the same disappointment as formerly—not a single living thing was visible. When they halted at noon to eat sparingly of their slender store of provisions all three realized that they were face to face with a very serious situation.

"This will never do!" exclaimed François, after a few moments of silence. "We are covering too small a territory by keeping all together. I propose that we now separate—but not so far that we cannot hear each other's signals—and proceed as before. By so doing we stand a better chance of success. If a gunshot is heard from any one of us, the other two must hurry in his direction so as to aid in killing the game in case he is unsuccessful."

This advice was followed and the march was resumed, the boys being separated from one another by a distance of a couple of hundred yards. No difference at first resulted from this change of plan. After proceeding for a couple of hours, however, Pierre met with a great surprise. He suddenly came to a small open space in the forest, the ground of which was covered with a beautiful green turf. As he entered the clearing he beheld a magnificent elk standing a short distance off quietly feeding on the rich, soft grass. The noble animal scented his approach, for it immediately left off eating and, raising its head, sniffed the air suspiciously. As it did so Pierre could not repress an involuntary exclamation of admiration at its large size and the beautiful huge antlers that it moved restlessly through the air. At the same instant that Pierre raised his gun the elk caught sight of him, and giving a snort of alarm prepared to run away. But the lad was too quick for him, and, after taking a hasty aim, fired at the nearest shoulder. The shot was not fatal, but served with the pain it inflicted to infuriate the beast, which turned on his human

"HE VAINLY STRUGGLED TO REGAIN HIS FOOTING IN TIME, BUT FAILED."

enemy with a bellow of rage. Pierre knew that sometimes, when wounded, an elk would show fight and prove an ugly customer to deal with. He therefore hastened to reload. The animal, as though guessing his intention, started with lowered head and a cry, halfway between a growl and a bellow, and ran rapidly in the young hunter's direction. Pierre realized that the distance was too short to give him time to prepare for another shot so he took to his heels, hoping to get behind some thicket where the elk could not readily follow him. He would probably have gained his object had he not had the misfortune to slip and, losing his balance, fall prone upon the ground. He knew his peril for he heard the sharp thud upon the turf of the hoofs of the maddened beast as he rushed upon him. He vainly struggled to regain his footing in time but failed. He was already up on one knee when the wild, angry eyes seemed only a few feet away and the murderous-looking antlers almost touched him. His heart failed him as he realized that he was at the wounded brute's mercy, and closed his eyes expecting to be gored to death and trampled upon the next instant.

Suddenly a voice rang out clear and strong, the voice of his brother Jean, "Play dead!" Then there flashed through his mind the recollection of having heard somewhere that many wild animals will not molest a dead man, and that some hunters had escaped with their lives when defenceless by simulating death. He accordingly fell back to the ground motionless and lay there limp and without breathing. The next second seemed to him an eternity. He knew that Jean would come to his rescue if the beast's attack could be delayed ever so little. As it was, the elk stopped suddenly as he saw the seemingly lifeless figure stretched out before him. Then his hot steaming muzzle touched the boy's face as he proceeded to investigate his prostrate enemy's condition. Pierre held his breath and lay still, with closed eyes, straining his ears to hear the first sounds of approaching aid. A snapping of a dry stick was heard, then the report of a gun fired near at hand. He opened his eyes only to see the huge animal, whose enormous bulk towered above him, falling down without a moan with a bullet in his heart, while Jean sped anxiously

toward him. He was saved! Pierre quickly sprang to his feet, and the two brothers embraced each other affectionately. At the same moment a crashing sound was heard and François broke from the woods into the open space on the run. He understood the situation at a glance. Going up to Pierre, he asked with alarm: "Are you hurt?" Then seeing that his friend was uninjured he turned to Jean and gave him a resounding slap on the shoulder. "Well done, *mon ami!*" he cried admiringly. "That was a perfect shot. There's not a *coureur-de-bois* in all New France that could have done better."

Little time was lost, however, in unnecessary words, and they were all three soon busy—Jean making a fire while the others quickly cut off a steak, which was promptly cooked. After a hearty meal they spent the rest of the afternoon in cutting more meat into strips and letting them hang in the smoke of the fire. By morning a plentiful supply of food was thus ready for them. They then resumed their route toward the place where they had left the canoes, and by mid-afternoon were once more afloat. The next day they entered the waters of the Ottawa.

CHAPTER X

DEVOTED TO A GAME OF HIDE AND SEEK

THEIR first camp was fireless, as the cautious François deemed it prudent to display no signals that would attract two-footed prowlers. The first morning after this was done the two brothers awoke to find themselves alone. By the time breakfast was ready François appeared. Although he said nothing, his companions detected a look of concern in his face that he tried in vain to hide. Upon being asked the cause of his anxiety he replied:

"Nothing that I can put a finger on. I somehow scent danger in the air, but after exploring this vicinity for the past hour, I can find no evidence of it in any direction. We must be on our guard, however, as we are getting near the enemy's country."

That night a watch was kept but nothing of an alarming nature occurred. Again did François disappear before breakfast, only to return in a short time. He beckoned to the two brothers, and leading them to a thicket of underbrush that protected their camp on one side, showed them a tree the moss on which had been recently rubbed at about the height of a man's shoulder, and also a number of tiny broken branches so arranged as to leave a small open space through which an enemy might overlook their encampment. The boys stared at one another.

"I can't see that that means anything," said Pierre bravely. "Any animal could have left these signs."

François shook his head in dissent.

"The animal that has been here has a red skin, walks on two legs and has ten fingers. We are followed and watched."

Their food was eaten in silence. The discovery just made

seemed to act depressingly upon the spirits of the three. After starting again, however, on their journey, and the dark shadows of the woods were exchanged for the bright clear, sunshiny air, their brains cleared of all anxiety, and even François was disposed to belittle the importance of the disturbing signs.

That night all went well. François, who kept the last watch, sat muffled in his blanket with his back against a tree, his eyes peering watchfully in all directions as the early gray of dawn struggled with the surrounding darkness. While thus engaged a slight sound attracted his attention. Summoning all his powers of observation, he watched the woods in the direction whence the sound came. A slight movement of a branch followed. It was pulled aside still further. Finally an opening was made and the features of an Indian appeared. With a swift glance, he took in the condition of the camp with its three motionless figures. Francois' eyes from the depths of his blanket watched every movement of the intruder without fear of detection. The savage, reassured by the silence and tranquillity of the scene, inspected more slowly the disposition of the three boys. When his eye fell upon the two brothers sleeping peacefully, a gleam of satisfaction shot athwart his swarthy features. The solitary muffled figure leaning against the tree with his rifle resting carelessly across his knees was next observed carefully. His motionless pose evidently convinced the savage that he was asleep, for he pushed his face more boldly through the opening and regarded him with a look of mingled hate and satisfaction.

Suddenly the face was withdrawn and an instant later the barrel of a gun was gently thrust through the branches, its muzzle aimed directly at the supposedly unconscious François. Quick as a flash the latter's weapon was brought in line with that of the enemy and the trigger pulled. At the same instant the boy threw himself flat upon the ground and rolled over a few times, then jumped nimbly up and disappeared behind the protecting trunk of the tree against which he had been leaning. The Indian's gun was discharged a fraction of a second later than his own. Its bullet went wild, striking high among the tree branches, showing a disturbed aim, while a terrible yell

arose from among the underbush that betrayed the success of the young lad's hasty shot.

The two brothers were awakened by the sound of firearms and seeing their companion seeking shelter, hastily seized their own guns and posted themselves behind trees ready for any further attack. None came, however. A muffled groan and the sound of snapping twigs proceeded from the direction of the enemy, then all was still. After some moments' delay, Francois motioned to his companions to remain where they were, while he glided from tree to tree in a circuitous direction and disappeared in the forest. The boys waited patiently for a full quarter-of-an-hour, then heard the familiar signal of their friend, the cry of a loon, and a moment later beheld him step boldly into the open space of the camp and beckon to them. They promptly emerged from their place of concealment and joined him with wondering eyes. He told them briefly what had occurred and led them to the spot where the savage had stood.

"I am sorry this thing has happened," he said gravely, "because I undoubtedly killed him. No man could lose the amount of blood you see scattered about on the leaves, and live. His friends evidently took him away for burial. This is the first Indian I have ever slain," he added with a slight shudder, "but it was either his life or mine, a fair fight, and favour to neither side. This event will further increase our dangers, for now it means war to the death on the part of 'The Rat' and Winnatoka. It must have been their companion whom I hit, for his features were strange to me. Before this, their efforts were mainly directed against our getting the skins. Now the motive of revenge will be added. From this hour we must double our precautions. We have a crafty enemy to deal with. To succeed we must prove ourselves more crafty than he."

With sobered, thoughtful faces, the three retraced their steps and hastily loaded the canoes, casting many a furtive glance at the surrounding forest meanwhile, and embarked on their journey without stopping to eat their breakfast. It was not until their eager paddles had urged them some leagues on the way and the bright sun and the peaceful aspect of nature had had their effect on their youthful

minds, that their naturally bright and courageous dispositions asserted themselves once more.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed boastful Pierre, as he gave a vicious downthrust with his paddle, "who's afraid! We have outwitted them before and we shall do so again."

Even Jean shared in his brother's feeling as he replied with a defiant toss of the head:

"We are three to their two now. If we cannot check their villainy we deserve to lose the furs and our scalps too."

François was more reserved in speech as he swept his canoe close to his companions.

"We shall succeed if we observe three things."

"What are they?" cried the brothers with interest.

"The first is caution. The second is more caution. The third is more caution still," and with a laugh he shot ahead, and looking over his shoulder challenged the two brothers to a race toward the next bend in the river, which was promptly accepted.

That night no landing was made, Pierre and Jean taking turns in getting what sleep they could, while François remained at his post of leader, a little in advance of the rest. The night was clear with a nearly full moon to brighten the surface of the river and cast deep shadows along its edge, where the travellers laid their course. They hoped by thus proceeding without stopping that they would put a long distance between themselves and their pursuers. The moonlight showed them their mistake, for, resting from their labours and allowing themselves to drift, they chanced to gaze back along the silvery track of the stream. As they did so, far away in the distance they descried a canoe with two occupants shoot round a point of land at full speed. The enemy were hot upon their trail. This sight spurred on their lagging speed until day dawned, the morning of the eleventh day since leaving Michilimackinac. In the middle of the forenoon they came to the mouth of a stream on the left. The two brothers were surprised to see François make for shore at this point, but followed his example without hesitation. When they had landed they found the spot admirably adapted for concealment.

"I believe this is the stream we are seeking," explained François, as they carefully hid their canoes. "My idea is to lie in wait for the enemy at this point. If they pass by, then this is not the place. Should I be right, however, we shall see them turn up the tributary, thinking that we know the place of concealment as well as they. We have some three or four hours' start of them, so two of us can afford to take a little rest."

Pierre was accordingly posted to watch while the other two stretched themselves out and straightway fell asleep. It seemed to them that they had scarcely closed their eyes when they felt Pierre's hand on their shoulders and heard his voice whispering:

"Here they come."

The three boys, screened from observation, peered out upon the river. A few moments passed and they beheld the canoe of their foes approaching. It came so close to shore that the hidden watchers could recognize the faces of 'The Rat' and Winnatoka as they passed. When opposite the tributary stream, the canoe swerved sharply and entered at full speed the swollen water-course. When they had disappeared François laughed quietly to himself.

"You see I was right. This is the river we are looking for. The next thing to do is to outwit those cunning rascals." After a few moments' thought his mind was made up. "Come!" he exclaimed, "out with the canoes. We will follow them."

While engaged in getting off, he explained his plan. "They will have a good half-hours' start. They will probably land somewhere near the spot we are seeking and look around for us. Not finding any traces of our whereabouts, they will watch the river. We will come along in uncertain fashion as though looking for the place, will pass on above it and shortly return descending to the Ottawa again. We will then hurry up that river a couple of leagues, hide our canoe, and steal across the intervening strip of land. The redskins on seeing us pass down the stream will conclude that we cannot find the landing place we are after and have given up, either to go home or to search some other tributary. They will then follow us and descend the Ottawa for some distance before discover-

ing their mistake, thus giving us time to find the furs, or else they will remain to seek them themselves. In which case, thinking we have gone, it will not be difficult to surprise them. I would not mind making them prisoners a bit."

This plan was straightway carried out. They had not ascended the strange stream far when they came to a long narrow island, just such an one as appeared upon their map.

"I would wager a million skins, if I had them," remarked Pierre as they drew near, "that that is the place where those rogues have landed."

"Yes, and at this very moment are watching our every movement," added Jean.

"Keep near the shore," warned François. "They would love nothing better than to take a pop at us from ambush if we came too close. By hugging the western edge, we are practically out of gunshot."

There were no signs of the enemy anywhere. The afternoon sun brightened the wilderness, silent and deserted save for the splash now and then of a hungry fish and the distant scream of a hawk that hovered above their heads. Beyond the island a short distance they spied on the right bank the spot they had come so many leagues to see: a curve in the shore with a cleared space running back some hundred yards, where it was finally hemmed in by the forest. Slowly the canoes passed on another league, then turned and came back as slowly. The island was passed again without any sign of hostility from the enemy. When this was hidden by a turn of the river, François shouted "Hurry!" and the paddles made the waters fairly boil as the two canoes sped toward the little stream's mouth. This being gained, they turned up the Ottawa instead of down, and after a league or more had been traversed, a suitable place for landing was found and the canoes carefully hidden. The stores and ammunition were quickly shouldered and the three hardy youths started eastward through the woods.

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH THE MYSTERIOUS RECORD GIVES UP ITS SECRET

An hour's tramp through the woods brought them to the western shore of the tributary stream at a point opposite the island. Here they halted and threw down their burdens, where a fine view was had without danger of betraying their own position. They spent some time on the watch before anything occurred, and Jean expressed the fear that the Indians had left their place of concealment while they were engaged in their land journey. Pierre, too, leaned toward this belief and advocated their bold advance across the river without further loss of time. François, however, shook his head.

"A false move now might wreck all our plans. We must wait until we know the whereabouts of the enemy."

The wisdom of this course was shown in a few moments. While the boys scanned the island steadily, a canoe shot out suddenly from some hidden spot into mid stream. It held two occupants, who hastily paddled away to the southward in the direction originally taken by the three lads and was soon lost to sight. After waiting so long without seeing the boys return, the savages were evidently convinced that they had gone for good and accordingly started after in hot pursuit. Pierre generously acknowledged his mistake.

"You were right, as usual, François," he said. "Your head is worth both of ours."

The older boy smiled good-naturedly.

"He that has savage foes to deal with must learn to curb his impulses, otherwise he may easily come to grief.

However, now is the moment for action. We must lose no time, for those rascals will be back inside of twenty-four hours."

So saying, he led the others to a point a half-league higher up the stream where a convenient ford was located. They waded across with the water up to their waists, carrying their loads to a place of safety on the opposite shore. Here a fire was lighted and their clothes dried, while a quantity of venison was cooked so that they would not have to bother about the question of food very soon, but could devote all their time and energies to the task before them. François spread out the mysterious chart once more and all three attempted to decipher its meaning.

"The spot where we are now," explained François, putting his forefinger upon the map, "is on the shore of this little bay that is clear of trees save those four tall pines yonder."

"And these marks starting from the nearest tree and passing toward the right of the map look like Indian foot-prints, for they are all pigeon-toed tracks," interrupted Jean eagerly.

"Yes," replied François, "and there are just fifteen of them. They lead to these two round objects which I imagine are the stones referred to in the inscription below."

"We are getting along finely," exclaimed Pierre with enthusiasm. "Let us go and see where these strange tracks will lead us."

All three repaired to the nearest of the four lone pines, and Pierre, starting with his back against its trunk, proceeded to take manly strides in the direction indicated. Jean and François followed him, keeping careful count of his steps. His course led them directly toward the forest. Much to their surprise they found this to consist only of two rows of evergreens, and when these were passed a large open space appeared, screened from the river by the trees and extending northward toward the line of distant hills with scarcely a shrub to intercept the view.

"Eleven—twelve—thirteen—fourteen—fifteen," counted Pierre and then stopped. "And here are the two stones."

These stones proved to be the tops of huge boulders

buried in the soil which protruded their gray-white heads about two feet above the surface of the ground. A man could easily stand with a foot on either stone, so close were they together.

"So far, so good," exclaimed Jean gleefully, brimming over with excitement. "But what comes next?"

"Let us read the inscription," suggested François. "'With a half string from the stones standing to the notch——'"

"That is as clear as a sum in mathematics would be to Winnatoka and his tribe," Pierre muttered glumly.

"'From the stones standing to the notch,'" repeated François to himself. "'From the stones standing' would mean that one was to do something while standing on these two rocks." So speaking he climbed up and stood in the manner designated. "'To the notch' means a direction, but where is there any notch in sight?"

Jean clambered up beside his friend and the two looked about them on every side. At last he gave a little gasp of surprise and pointed northward toward the range of hills. These were not very remarkable in appearance, their outline against the sky being much the same as would be expected; but between two of them there appeared an angular gap, very different from the rest and one that might easily be called a notch. François comprehended Jean's gesture in an instant.

"You are right," he said as he jumped down to look at the map again. "We might have known that from the drawing. See, here is the line of hills near the top, and here is the notch plainly marked."

Encouraged by the progress thus made, the first part of the inscription was next considered.

"What I can't understand," began Pierre, "is what is meant by a half string! Who ever heard of a half string?"

Even François shook his head dubiously and was completely nonplussed.

"It probably means something that is familiar to trappers and Indians alike," suggested Jean thoughtfully.

In an instant François' brow cleared on hearing these words.

"How stupid!" he exclaimed. "The Indians some-

times speak of their bow being at the half string when the arrow is drawn back halfway. In other words, it means an arrow shot with one half the usual force."

"If we only had a bow and arrow, you could stand on the stones, aim at the notch and with a half shot end all our perplexities," exclaimed Jean regretfully.

Pierre looked at his brother in scorn.

"And where did you suppose we were going to find a bow and arrow in this wilderness? Did you think yonder hawk would drop them at our feet, or did you expect Winnatoka to return and obligingly lend us his?"

The others laughed at the absurdity of this speech.

"We do not need to have a real bow and arrow to go ahead with our discoveries," resumed François encouragingly. "We can estimate roughly the distance meant. Let me see—a grown Indian in a full bowshot would probably cover a distance of two hundred paces. A half string would mean about half that number. Let us try it."

So saying he began at the rocks and paced slowly in the direction of the notch. When one hundred steps had been counted off he stopped, and putting a stick in the ground for a marker, sat down map in hand to study its hidden meaning further.

"'On the full twelve right end,'" he read in a puzzled tone and looked at the other two for help.

"The full moon," suggested Pierre.

"And twelve must mean the hour of midnight," added François.

The two brothers gave a cheer at the success so far obtained in deciphering the hidden message.

"But what has the full moon got to do with this?" Pierre asked impatiently.

François was silent a moment as he tried to think of some possible explanation.

"The furs are probably buried somewhere near this spot," he murmured aloud. "These words are a clue to the discovery of their exact location. It would be most natural to give two direction lines at right angles to each other at whose intersection we would find the desired treasure. We have evidently one of these lines now,

what objects are there by means of which with the moon's aid we could run a line at right angles to this one ? " and he looked about the open space in vain.

Pierre repeated his question. François hastened to reply.

" The moon might cast a shadow of some object on the ground that would give the line we are in need of. Further than that we could not use the moon at all."

" Then I give it up," exclaimed Pierre petulantly, " there is nothing anywhere near us except that old tree that has no life left in its trunk."

The tree referred to was a tall blasted pine shorn of all its branches save two, a melancholy ruin indeed, situated about a dozen paces to their left. The boys drew near and examined it curiously. Jean, after a thoughtful look, seized the map from François and after a glance exclaimed joyfully :

" I have it, I have it ! Here you see it plainly marked, the only tree in all this open ground. It has two branches, one on the left short and broken off, the one on the right three times as long. They correspond exactly to the drawing."

The other two boys confirmed this important discovery.

" All we have to do, then," exclaimed Pierre in triumph, " is to wait until midnight, note the direction cast by the right-hand branch above us, and extend that line until it crosses the one we have already laid out."

François nodded.

" And as the sun is already disappearing," he said, " we had best get a nap and be bright and fresh when midnight comes."

" I am too excited to sleep a wink to-night," exclaimed Jean enthusiastically.

" So am I," added Pierre.

" Then we will all keep watch together," said François, good-naturedly agreeing with the other two.

The three stretched themselves on the ground beside the tree to rest and talk until the midnight hour should give them the information sought. The sun sank rapidly, leaving a great splash of color in the sky that faded into pink, then grey, then merged slowly into the oncoming

dusk. No sound of night prowling beasts came to their ears. All was still save for a melancholy owl in the distant woods that startled now and then even their accustomed ears with his raucous tones. The twilight fast faded into night, while thousands of stars like so many spying eyes peeped down inquiringly at them. As they watched the east, a glow soon came that spread, and suddenly the bright edge of the moon appeared above the neighbouring woods, increasing in size momentarily until at last it sailed upward majestically like a silver ship in a sea of darkest blue, flooding the scene with its soft light. The boys watched this slow transformation of the face of nature with interest not unmixed with awe.

At length the silence was broken by Jean, who spoke in a voice whose tone was tinged with home-sickness:

"To think that this same moon is looking down to-night on Quebec and watching what father and Uncle Ormesson are doing as well as keeping an eye on us. I wonder what they are about this evening."

"Counting the days until we return and wondering what has really happened to us. They have learned by this time of the failure of the expedition in opening a way for the fur fleet and are correspondingly depressed," was Pierre's comment. "Their mourning and that of all Quebec will be turned into joy in a few days when the tidings reach them of the arrival of the *coureurs-de-bois* at Montreal."

"The news will not affect them much, I fear," added François.

"Is our successful arrival with the lost skins then of such overwhelming importance?" queried Jean with concern. "Of course, I know it would mean a large increase in their business returns——"

"It denotes much more than that," quietly interrupted François. "It means that their financial credit will be saved, if we accomplish what we are after. If not—then ruin for both of them. You evidently have been kept in ignorance of the condition of their affairs. I learned all about it from a reliable source just before leaving Quebec. I have said nothing about the matter heretofore, because I did not want you to have any unnecessary worry; but now I think it only right that you should be

told how important the favourable fulfilment of our hopes is to both your father and uncle."

The brothers drew near so as not to lose a word of their companion's recital and listened intently as he proceeded.

"It seems that in the year following your uncle's death they undertook a couple of trading schemes that utterly failed. About a year ago it was necessary to borrow a sum of money to clear them; but money was scarce in Quebec and few had any to lend. At length they fell into the clutches of old René Poucard, who is said to be a regular Jew and a confirmed miser. He came to their rescue, but on hard terms. I did not learn what the amount involved was, but I do know that unless that debt is paid by the first day of June, only a short time from now, your father's and uncle's houses, and in fact everything they own, will be gobbled up by that greedy old man. Nothing can be done to him, for everything is perfectly legal. The only salvation for them is our ability to find and bring to Quebec in safety this store of skins we are now seeking. You can thus see how much depends upon our efforts and the good fortune that we hope will attend them."

The boys were quiet a moment after François ceased speaking. Jean was the first to break the silence.

"Will the value of these five hundred skins we are after be large enough to cancel the indebtedness?" he asked.

"Yes, and leave something over, I should imagine," was the reassuring reply.

"Why weren't we told of this in the beginning?" burst forth Pierre hotly. "Then, after leaving the expedition we could have come directly here and left the cowardly *coureurs-de-bois* cooped up in Michilimackinac to cool their heels a while longer. In that case, too, we should have had no opposition to our search, no 'Rat' or Winnatoka dogging our footsteps like a pair of hounds."

"You forget, Pierre, that we had our duty to our King and Colony to attend to first. We started out under the commands of our superior officer, the Governor. Until we had exhausted every possible effort to carry out his orders, we had no business to look after our own private affairs," was Jean's quick rejoinder.

"Of course you are right," exclaimed Pierre, half

ashamed of his former words. "My mind was so filled with thoughts of our father and uncle fretting their lives out over impending disasters, that I confess I had no room left for anything else. The necessity of our success is great, therefore we must succeed. If we should fail, I, for one, will never go back to face them."

"And leave them to bear the burden of poverty alone?" exclaimed Jean, thoroughly out of patience with his brother's pettishness. "For shame, Pierre! You would do nothing of the kind. We would return to share their evil days with them."

"Of course both of you would," spoke up François, to relieve Pierre of his embarrassment, "only I do not believe there will be any necessity for our entering Quebec except in triumph. We are three against two; we shall succeed. I will do the best I can, that much is certain. You remember the terms of our brotherhood: that the danger or necessity for one of us becomes the same for all, and calls for our united best endeavour."

Silence followed this serious and spirited conversation, the two brothers musing upon what they had just learned. François wrestling with problems that he knew they must face in the near future. The moon climbed steadily in its appointed path, the stars marched, a brilliant phalanx, in their slow procession, thus marking for observant eyes the passage of time. Still the three human figures remained motionless, unconscious of their surroundings.

At length François looked up and noting the changed position of the constellations announced to his comrades that the hour of midnight was near. They all arose eagerly and approached the tree. Sure enough there lay a long black shadow cast by the right-hand limb pointing plainly the direction for them to take. Proceeding along this line, they came to the point of its intersection with the first one laid out. This was marked. Desirous of not losing any precious time, the lads determined to take advantage of the brilliant moonlight instead of waiting for morning. Not having any tools with which to dig, they proceeded to fashion some. This was accomplished by cutting several sharp-pointed stakes with their hatchet. Two of them proceeded to attack the ground with these

rude implements, which resulted in loosening or harrowing the surface of the soil over an area some twelve feet square. The third followed after with a rude paddle he had made, which he used to shovel the loose earth to one side. An hour was thus spent and they had gone down about a foot when they struck against a hard substance which, when cleared off, proved to be a row of saplings laid close together and covering a space about three feet square. These were finally dug up and thrown out, revealing a hole large enough to admit the body of a full-grown man.

The three looked at one another in amazement. This was not what they had expected to find. François, bidding the others rest, hastened to the river where, from a favourable point, he looked to see if there was any sign of the returning enemy. The moonlight shone so brightly upon the water that a dark object the size of a canoe would have been visible a league away. Nothing of a suspicious nature coming within his range of vision, he returned to his friends and reported that all was well. He then blew upon the remaining coals of their dying fire, until he lighted a pine stick, whereupon he approached the hole and thrusting the blazing torch down as far as possible peered in. The hole was about six feet deep, but empty. The two brothers, who were gazing anxiously over his shoulder, uttered low exclamations of disappointment. François let the torch drop. It burned brightly where it fell and revealed the fact that a subterranean passage of some sort led off from the pitlike cavity they had unearthed and which served really as a sort of vestibule.

"A cave!" exclaimed all three at this revelation.

The pine stick burned so brightly that they were not afraid of the presence of any noxious gases, and began immediately their preparations to descend into the mysterious cavern. Before doing so they collected their belongings, food, ammunition, etc., which they had brought with them, besides cutting a plentiful supply of pine knots for torches. All signs of their presence were obliterated where this was possible, the remnant of their fire was extinguished and the ashes scatt[illegible] Dead leaves were carefully distributed over the are[illegible]e the digging had been done. The sapling stakes were laid alongside the

hole so that the last one entering could replace them.

"We can't keep these devils from tracking us," muttered François, as these preparations were completed, "but we will make it as hard for them as possible."

So saying he motioned to Pierre who, torch in hand, dropped into the opening. He was followed by Jean, and François, with one lingering look about in all directions, joined them after adjusting as best he could the saplings over the mysterious entrance.

CHAPTER XII

A SUBTERRANEAN CHAPTER IN WHICH AN ENEMY IS VANQUISHED

THE entrance being thus closed, François took the lead, torch in hand, and the three boys started upon their underground exploring expedition. They advanced along a narrow passage whose roof receded gradually from their sight for some score of paces, when it suddenly expanded into a large chamber whose floor was strewn with bits of stone, while the top was lost in impenetrable shade. The walls were white and glistened with moisture as the torch's glow disseminated the gloom that enveloped everything. A short distance farther on and they came upon what looked like an immense icicle of stone depending from the roof. At the lower end was a drop of water which, as they watched, fell upon a corresponding mass of stone which was built up from the floor. The water was so highly charged with lime that when it evaporated it left a tiny deposit of that substance behind, thus explaining the gradual growth of the stony icicles which some day were destined to meet, coalesce, and form one of the many limestone columns visible on all sides. After noting this curious phenomenon and each had made a guess as to the number of years that must elapse before the two parts would unite, the party pushed resolutely on. As they advanced, the number of these formations, known to present-day science as stalactites and stalagmites, increased. Suddenly a tiny rivulet of water was discovered coming from nowhere in particular and disappearing in the darkness ahead of them. Pierre knelt down and drank heartily. He pronounced the water very cold and re-

freshing, whereupon the other two followed his example.

The way soon began to grow more wearisome owing to the fact that many stones, some of them boulders of huge size, intercepted the path. These were sometimes so close together that the boys could scarcely squeeze through the intervening spaces. Occasionally the way was practically blocked. Then it was that the masses of rock were scaled, the lads helping one another to scramble up and down their slippery surfaces. Once as they proceeded, they halted suddenly on a signal from François, who listened intently. It was a false alarm, however, no sound being audible other than the solemn drip-drip of some unseen water, and a peculiar squeaking and fluttering in the regions above, which proved to be alive with bats. The light disturbed them and they flew about blind and uncertain. At one point Jean raised a howl of terror and clapped his hands to his head. His comrades, alarmed at his cry, came instantly to his relief. The torch revealed the cause of his sudden fright—a bat in his benighted flight had struck him on the head and, finding his hair a soft resting place, clung there tenaciously, despite all efforts to remove him. A solution of the difficulty was at last arrived at and Jean was released from such intimate association with the little creature only by cutting the locks of hair to which it clung.

A short distance beyond the place where this adventure occurred the road branched. Here François halted and announced that it was time for food and rest, besides, the forking of their path necessitated another consultation of the map. Accordingly their loads were laid on one side, another torch lighted and a hearty meal eaten, which was washed down by frequent draughts from the runnel of water that still followed their course. A sense of fatigue, which they had not felt before owing to the excitement of the past twenty-four hours, seized them, and postponing everything else they arranged a fire and then curled up on the uneven surface of the ground and were soon asleep.

When François awoke, he started up in alarm at the unaccustomed darkness that hemmed them in on all sides. After an instant's thought he remembered where they were. The fire he found reduced to a few glowing embers. After

some difficulty a cheerful blaze was coaxed into existence. Turning to the still slumbering brothers, he shook them vigorously :

" Come ! " he cried. " We must be up and doing. When we once reach Quebec, we can sleep for a week if we like, but with enemies on our trail we cannot afford to lose time now."

The boys thus urged shook off the grasp of slumber and having stretched and yawned themselves wide awake, joined him in studying the mysterious chart by the light of the fire.

" We had nearly ended deciphering the inscription when we started digging. Let us see if we cannot finish it now," began François as he carefully unfolded the precious piece of paper.

" It is easy to understand that ' on the full ' really meant the full moon, as we guessed ; that ' twelve ' stood for midnight, and ' right end ' the direction pointed out by the shadow from the end of the right-hand branch," commented Pierre as he gazed at the diagram before them. " But what does ' down ' mean ? "

" Down the hole we found, into the cave," suggested Jean.

" Good," grunted Pierre. " You had better go to the head of the class ; but before you do so suppose you explain what ' two right, one left,' stands for."

Jean was silent, industriously thinking. François' gaze wandered toward the top of the map.

" This square made up of right-angled lines crossing each other," he muttered, as though to himself, " that is, at the right of the lone tree, I suppose represents the saplings covering the hole by which we entered."

Jean, whose bright eyes had been going over the whole plan, caught these words. A thought flashed through his mind.

" Down here in the left-hand lower corner is another square made up of crossed lines," he pointed out eagerly. " Why shouldn't that mean the same hole and the snaky lines running up from it be the route to be followed underground ? "

Pierre burst into a boisterous laugh that sent the echoes flying through the cavern.

"Down you go to the foot, youngster," he cried scornfully. "Why don't you point out next some mark that is intended to represent the boulder I am leaning against?"

François smiled quietly as he looked at Pierre.

"Nevertheless your brother is right," he said. "He has done what neither of us could do, he has solved the rest of the problem."

"Pooh! I don't believe it," was the elder brother's incredulous reply.

"See," continued François, "his idea explains the last four words of the inscription 'two right, one left.' They refer to the windings and turns of the cave. If we follow this rude diagram, we see that the route branches twice. The first turn to the right we must disregard, the second we must follow, and then take the first to the left and we shall arrive at our destination—the hiding place of the furs marked by this heavy cross. It is all as plain as daylight to one after hearing Jean's suggestion."

Pierre shook his head doubtfully, but prepared to follow the others in testing the truth of their guess. They went by the first passage leading to the right and kept straight ahead. At the next forking of their road, they followed the right. In a little while a small opening led off to the left and brought them inside of five minutes to a large chamber. Raising their torches aloft, they looked eagerly about them. Close at hand they beheld a large pile of pine knots and branches such as they had been burning. This was luck, as their supply was beginning to run rather low, although still sufficient to light them back to the entrance.

Advancing to the farther end of the huge underground room, they beheld a sight that brought an instantaneous cheer from the lips of all three. There packed and tied carefully in bundles, safe and dry, lay the coveted skins. Each bundle contained about twenty-five, making it a convenient and light load for transportation. The boys hurriedly examined the condition of the furs and found them perfect. They next counted the bundles and assured themselves that the five hundred skins were all there, then, as if by a common signal, dropped their guns and supplies and tossing the torches into a pile,

joined hands and danced gleefully about the flames.

After a few moments spent in this display of exuberant spirits, they calmed down and discussed their next step.

"We must not be too joyful," warned François, "for we are not out of the woods yet by any means. We have found the prize, it is true, but we are trapped like rats in this cave, with its narrow entrance, while outside bloodthirsty enemies are waiting by this time, if they have not already followed us underground."

This reference to Winnatoka and 'The Rat' brought shades of anxiety to the brows of the two brothers, for they both realized the truth of the words uttered. They waited for François to suggest the best course for them to take.

"We have located the furs," he went on, "and can easily come back for them. There are enough of them to make it necessary for us to take a half-dozen trips apiece in transporting them. It would be a foolish waste of time then to disturb them until we have found out whether the coast is clear, and if not, just where the enemy may be and how disposed, whether openly following us or ambushing our path. I would propose, therefore, that we leave everything here except our guns and a few pine knots which can be easily carried. We can proceed cautiously toward the mouth of the cave and find out just how the land lies. We shall then be governed as to future action by what we learn concerning the enemy."

This proposal was immediately adopted and the three started to retrace their steps. The way being familiar, they made rapid progress. Finally they reached that point where the barricade of boulders across their path was the most complete. They had just climbed over this obstruction when François' quick ear caught the sound of falling water on their right. Moved by curiosity they turned and proceeded a few paces toward this sound. It was well that they took the precaution of holding a torch so as to light their path, for they suddenly started back as a huge opening yawned at their feet. The hole was a veritable chasm some twenty feet in diameter, the farther edge reaching to the side wall of the cave. The boys promptly lay down and creeping forward peered into the depths below them, black as night, whose gloom was but made

deeper by the feeble light of their torches. A stream of water was seen pouring its small volume into the depths below that seemed incalculable. François let fall his lighted pine knot in order to determine, if possible, how far down the opening extended. It fell flaring, knocking against the sides of the great pit, gradually growing fainter and fainter until it finally disappeared.

The boys arose and stood still, staring in wonder at what they had seen. They finally turned in silence and started to continue their journey up a rather steeply-inclined ascent. They had not taken a half-dozen steps when they heard the sound of a great crashing and grinding coming from the darkness in front of them. In a flash François had seized Jean by the arm and with a warning shout "Quick! follow me!" partly led, partly dragged the younger boy to one side, Pierre following closely. Scarcely had he done so when a great boulder, round, and weighing fully a ton, rushed by them, crossed the place where they had been standing and disappeared down the chasm. As it was, their escape was narrow, for the wind made by the mass of stone in its headlong course fanned their cheeks and caused the flame of their torches to waver unsteadily.

François grasped the situation instantly.

"Redskins!" he exclaimed. "Get behind the row of boulders we have just climbed. Throw your torches over them ahead of you. I will stay and cover your retreat. Be quick about it, for there is no telling what will come next."

The two brothers did not hesitate, but taking all their torches they ran back, tossed the lighted sticks beyond the barrier and scrambled quickly over themselves. A few seconds later François joined them. He was not an instant too soon, for from the darkness ahead of them came a dozen flashes, bullets whistled above their heads and the reverberations of the discharges filled the cave with a deafening roar. The boys lay panting on the ground, protected by the boulders and looked anxiously out through the crevices between them, but could see nothing.

François gave an exclamation of alarm.

"How foolish," he said, in disgust at his own thoughtlessness, "to keep the lights here! The enemy can easily creep up without our seeing them."

He quickly seized the blazing pine knots and laid them on top of the largest mass of stone, thereby causing their light to fall upon the floor of the cave for some distance in front of their barricade.

"That is better," he muttered, "but it is not bright enough."

He then added to the pile all the remaining inflammable material they had with them. This soon blazed up, sending the shadows in retreat for some distance. As this occurred, several dark figures lurking behind rocks and stone pillars were seen to slink back into the darkness.

All was silent and the boys had an opportunity to take breath and discuss the situation.

"Phew! What a close shave!" exclaimed Pierre. "If you had not acted so quickly, François, that big rock would have struck us standing near the edge of the hole and carried whatever was left of us down into the bowels of the earth."

"Did you notice the number of flashes when they fired on us?" inquired Jean anxiously. "I am sure there must have been twelve."

"Yes," replied François grimly. "The cave in front of us seems alive with Indians. We haven't Winnatoka and 'The Rat' to deal with alone. They must have come across a roving band of redskins and induced them to join with them in their hunt for the furs and our scalps. Things look pretty bad now, I must confess. We shall be lucky if we can save our own skins without considering the furs. However," he added in an encouraging tone, "it will never do to despair, notwithstanding the odds against us."

"We ought to be a match for a whole dozen savages in holding this position," said Pierre stoutly.

"What good will it do to hold it, that's the question," was François' discouraging reply. "All the enemy have to do, if they dare not attack us, is to sit on their haunches and wait long enough to starve us out. They are between us and liberty."

"Never mind," put in Jean bravely, although his voice trembled as he spoke. "*Le bon Dieu* has helped us before, why may He not do so again? Let us hope He will. If

not, then we can at least die game as befits true soldiers of France."

These spirited words sent a thrill of hope through the other two. With a sudden motion, three hands were outstretched in the darkness and met three others that clasped them tight in a grasp denoting a firm purpose and a common feeling of affection and fellowship.

François was the first to speak:

"Forgive me, *mes amis*," he said, "for my hopeless tone. The grave danger, seemingly insurmountable for the moment, that threatens us caused my courage to waver; but you, Jean, you are braver than I, it seems; you have shamed me into hope once more. And now, good-bye to thoughts of gloom and despair: the time for action has arrived. Our fire will soon need replenishing. Do you, Jean, take a torch and go back to the place where we found the skins, and bring the supplies and ammunition we left there, together with a lot of the firewood and pine knots we saw heaped up. You will have to make several trips, so hasten. Pierre and I will remain on guard."

With these words he reached up, and seizing one of the firebrands on the top of the boulder, handed it to Jean and gave him a friendly slap on the back to hurry him on his errand. The latter needed nothing to accelerate his movements, however. He started off, torch in hand, at a jog trot, slowing his pace when the nature of the floor of the cave was rough, and speeding on again when it became smooth. Keeping in mind well the turns he had to make, there was no time lost on the way. In a few minutes he reached his destination. A glance around showed him that everything was exactly as they had left it. Seizing an armful of food and powder, he filled the other with wood, and staggering under his load and holding his torch with difficulty, he returned to the barricade.

François quickly replenished the fire and in a moment its flames were rising higher than ever. Nothing had transpired during Jean's absence. An ominous silence pervaded the gloom inhabited by the enemy. François shook his head dubiously.

"I wish they would show themselves more," he muttered. "When a lot of redskins on the warpath are quiet like

yonder rascals, there is trouble brewing. Maybe they have decided to starve us out and are watching the entrance hole from the outside like a pack of hounds who have run a rabbit to earth; or perhaps they will tire of doing nothing and are getting ready to make a rush against our position."

Finding that a portion of Jean's burden consisted of provisions, he urged him to eat heartily before making another trip, as there was no telling when the opportunity to do so would occur again. All three accordingly partook of the food, and refreshed their throats with long draughts from the tiny stream of water close at hand. The result was that they returned to their watch with strengthened physical powers and increased courage. Jean made a second trip, uneventful as the first, and brought a similar load, then set out again for more.

This time his return was delayed. At first the other two thought nothing of the matter, but suddenly it flashed upon the minds of both that he had been absent twice as long as he had been before. They cast many glances in the direction he had taken to see if they could not catch sight of the distant flaring of his returning torch, but in vain. Fears of his possible injury, of his having taken the wrong turn and being now lost amid the mazes of the unexplored portion of the cave assailed them. They debated between them the advisability of Pierre's going in search of his brother when François, whose watchful eye, even while he was conversing, kept a sharp watch in the direction of the enemy, gave a warning sound as he looked intently at a certain spot. Suddenly he seized a torch and motioning Pierre to follow him, crept swiftly along toward the right end of the barricade.

As has been intimated, this end of the defence was close to the chasm down which the three boys had looked with a shudder at its awful depth. In fact it went to its very edge, forming a protecting wall on one side. As the two lads approached this end, they were able to see into this bottomless pit. François raised his torch aloft and allowed its beam to fall as far as possible. The first sight that met their eyes was the figure of a savage, unarmed save for a knife he held between his teeth, creeping along a narrow ledge of rock that ran along the cave wall, bounding one

side of the great opening. His evident intention was to reach the farther end of the barricade in safety, climb over it in the darkness, and then gliding along in the shadows get to the rear of the besieged, so that when a rush was made on them from the front he could attack them while they were reloading. He had passed over the greater part of his perilous path when François's eye had detected a shadow of unusual shape on the wall and had immediately suspected some treacherous move on the part of the enemy.

By the time they had reached the position where they now stood, the redskin had crept still farther on his way. He saw them approach and quickened his efforts. As the light fell upon him, he stood ready to spring to safety, a distance of some six feet only intervening between himself and his goal. The boys both gave a cry as they beheld his fierce features lighted up by a look of diabolical cunning, for it was none other than their ancient foe Winnatoka who was so near. Even as they gazed, the savage leaped. He landed safely, but in recovering his balance, one foot slipped on the wet rock, his body swayed, unmanageable, an instant in the air, then toppled over, and with a cry of baffled rage, hate, and despair he fell down, down, down into the immeasurable depths below, his last scream ringing terribly in the ears of the two boys, who stood only a few feet away transfixed with the horror of the sight.

"HIS BODY SWAYED AN INSTANT IN THE AIR, THEN TOPPLED OVER."

CHAPTER XIII

WHEREIN ANOTHER TRICK IS PLAYED AND THE BIRDS ESCAPE

WHEN Jean left his friends on the third trip he made the same haste as he had done previously and arrived at the storage place of the furs without mishap of any kind. As he emerged from the side passage leading from this chamber into the main cavern, he stopped a moment to give an inquisitive glance toward the unexplored portion of the cave. Curiosity to know whither it led caused him to take a step in that direction, but the thought of his comrades waiting for him and perhaps needing his help in the defence of the barricade made him pause. As he did so, some strange thing fluttered out of the darkness, struck full against his torch, and fell at his feet. He supposed, of course, that it was but a bat, but when he moved the light in its direction, he perceived that it was a blue jay that had been attracted in its flight by the glare, and striking its head against the blazing stick had been badly stunned. The full import of this incident flashed instantly across his mind. What was a blue jay doing in the cave? he asked himself. Bats he knew inhabited underground caverns, loving the darkness, but blue jays, never. The only solution to this mystery lay in the supposition that the bird had accidentally entered the cave from without. But where? Not at the entrance which they had made, watched as it was by Indians; besides, the bird had come from the opposite direction. *There must be another opening.*

His heart gave a great leap at this thought, so hastily dropping his load where he stood, he picked up the half-

conscious bird and advanced eagerly in the direction whence it had come. The way was easy, without branches, and the floor smooth and unencumbered by any obstacle. As he advanced, with every sense alert, the air seemed to become a little fresher. This gave him courage to press on.

Finally, after some ten minutes' walk, a sudden turn came in his path. As he rounded this, he gave a suppressed shout, for far ahead his anxious gaze caught a glimmer of sunlight. This rapidly increased until at length he came to an opening half closed with vines and shrubs. Pushing these aside impatiently he looked out into the open day. At first his eyes, accustomed for so many hours to the murky light of a torch and the darkness of the cave, were dazzled by the sunshine; but they soon adapted themselves to the new conditions and he beheld the tributary stream sparkling at his feet, a gentle descent leading to its edge from the point where he was standing. The bird, now very much alive, struggled violently for its freedom. Jean stroked it soothingly for a moment.

"Many thanks for your guidance, little bird," he said gently and with much feeling. "You have earned your liberty. Go now to your nest," and he released his hold.

The blue jay quickly accepted this opportunity of escape and soared exultingly away to a distant tree, where it alighted and scolded Jean at the top of its harsh voice for having handled it roughly, using all the bad words to be found in a blue jay's vocabulary. Jean remained standing, breathing in deep draughts of the cool fresh air, unmindful of the bird's ungrateful action. Joy was in his heart and throbbed through every fibre. This discovery meant life and liberty to them all, and home, and father, and a successful ending to their adventures.

Suddenly he remembered that he was wasting precious time. After replacing the vines so as to conceal the opening as much as possible, he retraced his steps rapidly, his mind filled with pleasurable emotion at the new turn taken by their fortunes. Stopping a moment at the spot where he had deposited his load, he mechanically resumed it and hastened on his way. He was greeted by his companions with congratulations on his safe return and inquiries regarding his prolonged absence. For reply he

hugged his brother and then François as the only adequate means of relieving his feelings, and then gave a hurried detailed account of his trip.

When he came to that point in his narrative where he stood gazing upon the outside world once more, Pierre threw himself down upon the ground and rolled and fairly squirmed with delight at the good news. Even François chuckled and gave Jean a congratulatory slap on the back that made him wince.

"You have solved the problem by a lucky chance, *mon ami*," he said; "it is necessary now for us to take advantage of your discovery."

"There has been nothing seen of the enemy since Winnatoka's horrible plunge," exclaimed Pierre. "Why can't we leave the fire burning and slip away out of this dark place at once?"

"We should probably be able to get a good start of them before they realized we were gone," added Jean.

"No," replied François firmly, "it would be folly for us to attempt to leave in daylight unless driven to do so by necessity. We do not know how many of the enemy may be prowling about the woods. We must leave at night. A redskin can only hear in the dark, he cannot see; by day he can do both. How stood the sun when you looked out?"

"About mid-afternoon," replied Jean.

A lengthy silence ensued, each one keeping a sharp watch ahead for the enemy, yet busy revolving various plans in his mind for their departure. Finally François spoke up.

"I have it all arranged."

"We are to leave at once," guessed Pierre.

"We are to wait until dusk and then make a dash for liberty," chimed in Jean.

"Wrong, both of you. Has the prospect of escape caused you both to forget the skins? Are we to walk off and leave the object of our errand here in the hands of those rascally Indians? Never! We will trick them by suddenly disappearing, it is true, but we will also carry away the prize with us. The enemy has been quiet so long I am at length convinced that they have determined on

starvation as the best means of victory over us. At any rate, we will go ahead on that supposition. There is therefore little chance of an immediate attack. I shall take Jean with me and go myself to reconnoitre, leaving you, Pierre, to watch and keep the fire bright. Should you see signs of an assault, retreat rapidly and join us."

When François and the younger lad reached the entrance, the former uttered an exclamation of delight.

"Everything is favourable to our scheme. See how the sun is disappearing behind that bank of clouds coming up from the west? That means no full moon to betray us. If it rains, as I think it will, we shall have any sound that we may make while escaping drowned by the noise of the elements. Our first work, however, will be to drop the bundles of furs down this descent. We can do that quickly now, although we must work carefully," here he glanced upward, "for you see the roof over the entrance is badly cracked and loosened and looks as though it might drop any moment and cut off our escape. A report of a gun fired from this spot would bring the whole mass down."

The two boys hurried back to the storage chamber and seizing a bundle of skins between them, soon had it at the opening and, dropping it down, watched it roll some distance toward the river. A second was sent after the first, until all the furs had been removed and lay outside the cave. While taking out the last layer of the pile a small keg of powder was discovered carefully hidden among the bundles. It had been kept perfectly dry and was ready for instant use. François chuckled and laughed silently for full two minutes when he saw this new supply of ammunition, his sides shaking with inner merriment. He vouchsafed no explanation of his good humour to his companions, but carried his burden to the entrance and deposited it carefully there. They then returned to Pierre who, although a little nervous over their long absence, had nothing to report. When François had told what they had done, he proceeded to unfold his plan.

"If the savages will hold off until midnight, I care not how fierce an attack they may make on us then," he began. "My idea is for Pierre and myself to remain here while Jean sallies forth to cover himself with glory. He will

have to slip out of the cave the moment it is dark, and, crossing the river, go through the woods to the Ottawa and find the spot where our canoes are hidden. Having done so, he must paddle down the Ottawa, towing the empty one behind, and come up this tributary stream to a point opposite the cave opening. We shall then join him and all three will carry the skins to the river, load them into the waiting canoes, then make off once more, and good-bye to 'The Rat' and all his devilish crew. If it rains, Jean can accomplish this journey without danger of being either seen or heard. He can be spared better than either of us, Pierre, for should an attack be made, your help would be more valuable to me than his in keeping the enemy at bay for a time. Besides, if any accident happened here in the cave, he would be outside and free with a fair chance of escaping home."

Jean and Pierre gave their hearty assent to this programme, the former feeling very proud that he should have been chosen for this important errand rather than Pierre. He accordingly awaited with eagerness the passage of time, in his excitement scarcely eating the food which François insisted on forcing on him. At length the older boy gave the signal for his departure, together with a few cautions and suggestions regarding the route he was to take. Armed with only a keen hunting knife and unencumbered by any powder horn, gun, or bullet pouch, he started on his hazardous task after embracing both of his friends heartily.

Upon reaching the entrance he found that night was just setting in. Overhead not a star was visible. After taking his bearings, he started down the steep incline and by dint of slipping, sliding, and falling he managed to reach level ground in safety, although not without making considerable noise in his descent. A raindrop striking against his cheek gave him encouragement. By the time he reached the river edge it was raining briskly. The sound of the accompanying wind through the trees was also in his favour, as he was thus able to move about with greater freedom without taking the precautions he would ordinarily have felt to be necessary.

As he prepared to ford the river, a sudden idea flashed through his mind. Why should he not steal near the

Indian camp and learn what he could about their numbers before setting out upon his real errand? Obedient to this impulse he turned downstream and strode along beneath the sombre trees at a rapid rate. The breath of spring was in the air. The warm raindrops splashed briskly against the imprisoned buds and tiny leaves bidding them awaken from their long winter sleep, then dripped slowly down to nourish the moss and roots and start the sluggish sap into more rapid circulation. The branches groaned and yawned and stretched themselves as though they, too, had been caught napping. The voice of spring touched the spirit of the lad as he glided along, arousing a feeling of exultant joy at being alive and free once more, filling his soul with courage for the accomplishment of great deeds and a hope of ultimate victory over all difficulties, dangers, and enemies.

When he had nearly traversed the distance he supposed lay between him and their original landing-place, he slowed his gait and proceeded with greater caution. At length he entered the water and noiselessly waded along close to shore. Presently in the darkness he came upon five canoes, their sterns in the water and their bows resting lightly upon the land. These crafts were of good size and easily capable of holding five persons. He judged by this that the number of the enemy besieging them was over a score. Satisfied as to this point, he stepped ashore, and stooping down crept through the double line of trees until he could get a view of the open space about the entrance to the cave. He beheld a small fire built on the leeside of the blasted pine and made out the forlorn figure of an Indian huddled up in his blanket sitting with his back against the tree. As he looked, this human form arose and approaching the fire replenished it and resumed his seat. A brighter glow suffused itself by this action. Jean eagerly scanned the neighbourhood, but could not discover the presence of any more of the savages. He then realized that, with the exception of this lone sentinel, the rest were probably safe and dry inside the cave.

Despairing of gaining any more information, he retraced his steps. The sight of the row of canoes left unguarded put a brilliant idea into his head. Why need he make the

laborious journey he had set out upon to get their own canoes when here were plenty to be had for the taking. He could thus save several hours of time and if undisturbed in his efforts could materially cripple the enemy so that pursuit would be out of the question. Accordingly, he unsheathed his knife and, wading alongside the first canoe, he cut a piece of birch bark from its side as large as a man's head. He then quickly launched it and, giving a vigorous shove, sent it out toward the middle of the river, where, seized by the current, it drifted away in the darkness gradually sinking as it went. Three more canoes were treated in this fashion and only one was left. Putting a couple of extra paddles inside he pushed off and left the landing place shorn of all signs of human occupation.

A little vigorous arm exercise, which served to warm him up, brought him to a place opposite the newly-discovered cave entrance. Here he landed and after securing his recently-acquired craft he clambered up the ascent into the cavern. Not having any light, he was obliged to proceed through the inky black darkness with caution. He had become by this time tolerably familiar with his route and made no mistakes. Suddenly, far away ahead of him he heard the sound of human voices and soon a gleam from the fire on the barricade reached his eyes. As he advanced at a quickened pace, he recognized the yells of the redskins and realized that they were making an attack.

The two older boys were so busily engaged in the defence that they knew nothing of Jean's approach until he glided through the firelight and took his place at their side. Not a word was said by anyone, all their energies being directed toward what was taking place in front of the barricade. On peeping through an orifice, Jean saw a number of shadowy forms flitting here and there just beyond the circle of light. A tremendous amount of yelling accompanied their movements, while every few seconds the spiteful flash of a firearm rent the gloom, which was followed by a whistling sound above their heads as a bullet sped on its harmless way. Once a savage darted out into the light and raised his gun to fire, but a shot sent by Francois' steady aim stretched him out motionless upon the floor. A yell of defiance and rage, fiercer even than usual, re-

verberated through the cave, the body of the slain warrior was dragged back into the darkness, and all was still. Then for the first time did Jean's friends speak.

"What was the matter that you returned so soon?" asked François anxiously.

"It wasn't that you were afraid?" demanded Pierre.

Jean laughed quietly, then related what he had learned and done. A fit of silent laughter on the part of François, and a stare of surprise from Pierre were the only comments Jean received at first on his narrative. A moment later François was once more sober.

"So then everything is ready for us to leave?" Jean nodded.

"Then let us get away from these redskins as fast as we can," exclaimed Pierre fervently. "I, for one, am tired of their company."

"You are right," was François' firm reply. "They have evidently given up the idea of starving us out. They are growing impatient, their fingers itch to seize our scalps. They mean business now. In my opinion they are preparing for a final attack. They will come with a rush, counting on their superior numbers for success."

Already were the threatening yells beginning again while the boys talked.

"Load up as best you can," commanded François with military brevity. "Take all the food and ammunition you can carry. I will brighten the fire a little, and we will be off."

So saying, he tossed on an armful of fuel, seized his share of the stuff, and grasping a firebrand which he held down close to the ground, started rapidly off on a jog trot, followed by the two brothers. By this time the chorus of yells had reached a horrible volume of sound, reinforced as it was by the echoing walls of the cave.

"There they come," muttered François, as the three hurried along. "They are welcome to our nest now that the birds have flown."

François' surmise was correct. The redskins, after creeping along the edges of the shadows as far as they dared, had, at a given signal, rushed with a whirlwind of sound upon the barricade, swarmed up its front and dropped

over on to the other side. Surprised at not receiving any fire from the boys' guns, and doubly so at finding the place apparently deserted, they hesitated a moment fearing an ambuscade from behind some of the stony pillars. Nothing happening, they seized each a burning stick and searched the place thoroughly until they were convinced that their prey, which they had supposed securely trapped, was gone.

By this time the retreating lads had passed around a turn in their path so that the light from their torches was not visible. The savages held a moment's consultation, then advanced, torches in hand, carefully scrutinizing the interior of the cave as they went. One of them picked up a large freshly-charred splinter that had fallen from François torch and showed it to his companions. A yell of exultation followed. They knew they were on the right trail.

Meanwhile the boys had hastened along as rapidly as they could, puffing and perspiring under their loads. The entrance being gained, they stopped a moment for breath.

"That is the hardest work I have done for many a day," Pierre grumbled. "I'd most as soon be scalped as drop dead from over-exertion."

Jean stood against the wall, blowing away like a horse after the race is run. His eyes twinkled at his brother's words.

"Yes—it's—work," he managed to puff out, "but—think—of the—fun!"

François, himself pretty thoroughly winded, laughed.

"You are right, Jean," he said. "It is great fun. It's a game of hide and seek. Think how they are looking for us now, wondering where we have disappeared! Their eyes will drop out from surprise in a few minutes more, or I am much mistaken."

Without giving any explanation of these words, he ordered the other two to descend and place their loads in the canoe awaiting them and meet him at the spot where the bundles of skins lay. They obeyed. A faint cry came to his ears from the rear, showing that the enemy were not far behind. Seizing the little keg of powder, he made an opening in it with his knife and laid out a long train of the black stuff on the dry floor of the cave. He then placed

the keg at the farther end of this train. Going to the entrance, he paused an instant on the edge, then touching his torch to the powder, he vanished in the darkness. A flash ran along the ground until the keg was reached. An explosion occurred accompanied by the sound of falling rock. The weakened roof of the entrance fell down with a mighty crash, completely filling up the mouth of the cave and sealing it as though no cavern existed there.

CHAPTER XIV

TELLS OF A FORCED MARCH AND A NIGHT ATTACK

WHEN François reached the place where the bundles of skins lay, he found himself staring in the darkness at two gun muzzles and was challenged by Pierre's voice:

"Who's there?"

For answer he began to laugh softly, whereat the guns were promptly withdrawn and the two brothers rose up from the ground where they had been lying behind some of the skins.

"My, how we were frightened by that noise!" exclaimed Jean in a relieved tone. "We thought something dreadful had happened and did not know whether it was friend or foe that was approaching."

François gave one more loud chuckle before answering.

"The sound you heard was my farewell speech to the enemy before I retired. I thought it a shame to leave that keg of good powder for the savages to fool with: they might hurt themselves. I also thought it a pity for them to use our private entrance to the cave, so I closed it up with the assistance of the powder, thus accomplishing two ends at once. It also gave us more time in which to get away."

His two friends, realizing what had happened, gave themselves up to merriment at the plight of the redskins. Finally François interposed.

"Come, we have something else to do besides sitting here in the rain holding our sides. My joking mood is now over. You had better save the rest of your laughs until a little later. The thing to do now is to get these skins aboard and make a start on our voyage."

Within twenty minutes all was ready. The three took their places and pushed off in the darkness. They proceeded carefully close to shore until they came to the place where a few hours earlier Jean had set the enemy's canoes adrift. Here, in obedience to a whispered word from François, they landed and taking each his gun and paddle they passed rapidly to the edge of the open space. They could readily discern the small fire still faithfully tended by the lone sentinel. After making sure that they had but one Indian to deal with, they skirted the edge of the clearing until they stood at a point from which they could approach the unsuspecting savage from the rear.

By this time the rain was descending in torrents, so that all sounds of their advance were lost in the patter of the raindrops. All three had reached the tree on the other side of which sat the Indian, little dreaming of what was about to happen, and his capture seemed certain, when Pierre's gun striking against the trunk gave a note of warning. The boys then made a leap together around the tree and fell upon the enemy pellmell. François' hand had actually touched the blanket in which he was wrapped, when with a bound like a startled deer he was up and away, abandoning his cover to the elder boy's grasp. In four seconds he had crossed the clearing and disappeared in the forest, leaving the three boys standing beside his gun and the dying fire, very much chagrined at his escape.

"Never mind," said François cheerily, "his capture was not an essential part of my joke. He is well out of the way and being unarmed cannot harm us."

After a word of instruction he led the way to the entrance of the cave. Here all was still and deserted. Quickly the boys laid the sapling lattice-work over the hole and with their paddles heaped upon it the loose earth originally dug up. This they stamped down with their feet until the place was level with the surrounding ground. They worked rapidly and persistently until this task was completed. Then François, leaning on his paddle, indulged in another quiet laugh.

"This will keep them bottled up for at least twenty-four hours," he finally said. They have nothing to dig their way out with except their small hatchets and hunting knives

He who laughs last, you know, laughs best. I am only sorry we did not capture that rascal, though, for, on my soul, I believe he was none other than 'The Rat' In that case our victory would have been complete."

Jean shivered in his wet clothing.

"Had we not better start for home?" he chattered. "A little exercise would not hurt any of us."

"*Certainement!*" replied François. Then with the tone of a commander speaking to his troops, he added: "To the boats, my men," and strode off in the direction of the river. A moment later they stood in some perplexity at their landing place, then after peering anxiously through the darkness, moved up and down the bank for some distance. *Their canoe had disappeared.*

"Tricked again!" muttered François savagely. "This is some more of 'The Rat's' doings. While we were at worked he slipped around through the woods, and finding that all of their canoes had been destroyed made off with ours."

"And the furs!" wailed Jean.

"We have been the most obliging persons in the world," remarked Pierre in a disgusted tone. "We raced with 'The Rat' for the skins. We found them, got them out of the cave, loaded them into a canoe, added some ammunition and provisions and then politely turned them over to him. What a set of stupid dunces we are!"

"Not we, but I, for I am alone responsible for this mishap," retorted François. "Had I had a particle of sense in my head, I should never have left the place unguarded after that rascal disappeared. Two of us could have closed the entrance as well as three."

"And do you suppose we count for nothing?" asked Pierre warmly. "We expected to claim our share in the success of this expedition and we certainly intend to shoulder part of the blame of any mischance that may happen and not let you take it all. It was just as much our fault as yours."

"True, Pierre," spoke up Jean. "We have all been to blame, now let us all devise some means of recovering our loss."

"Anyway 'The Rat' can't go very far or fast without a

paddle—you see we each have one with us," suggested Pierre.

"Alas!" cried Jean. "There was one extra paddle left in the canoe."

Pierre, despairing of suggesting anything cheerful, relapsed into a moody silence. François, who had been thinking hard, took up the conversation at this point.

"The questions we must decide are first, what course is 'The Rat' likely to pursue; second, what can we do to recapture the prize. We must be quick about it, too."

"Won't he hide near at hand until the other redskins get out or we go away?" queried Jean.

"No," replied François with decision. "You must remember he is a half-breed. His sense of loyalty to his comrades, therefore, will be weakened. His white blood will make him selfish and desirous of profiting alone by the capture he has made. If he waits until his friends dig their way out, he will have to divide with them. If he abandons them, then the prize is his alone. He will, therefore, start for Montreal as quickly as possible."

"That is certainly logical," remarked Pierre, impressed by his companion's words.

"Now," continued Francois, "having decided in our own minds what he will probably do, the next question is what course is best for us to follow."

"Follow him," suggested Pierre.

"How, by water?" asked François. "We have no canoes; those of the enemy are sunk, and if we wait to raise one of them and mend it, he would get such a start that we could never hope to catch up with him. The same is true if we were to spend the rest of the night trying to find the canoes we left concealed on the Ottawa. Besides, those painted devils in the cave are going to get loose some time, and when they do, I, for one, would rather not be anywhere near. Their tempers will not be improved by their confinement."

"Tell us your plan, then," said Jean eagerly, "for I know you have one already mapped out in your mind."

François smiled at this innocent bit of flattery, then continued:

"My idea is very simple. It affords, however, our only

chance, and unless a better can be suggested, I advise its adoption. 'The Rat,' strong as he is, will find it a hard task to paddle that canoe with its heavy load very fast. He has to go down this stream, then down the Ottawa until the St. Lawrence is reached, and then quite a few leagues down that river before he reaches Montreal. If we were to start in a direct line through the forest for Montreal, straight as a bird flies, we should have a much shorter distance to travel than he. By hard work, I think, we can reach the St. Lawrence as soon as he does. If we do, we shall have a good chance of falling on him suddenly at night, for by that time he will think himself safe and will land at dark for rest."

"You are a wonder!" exclaimed Jean.

"That will be our only chance," commented Pierre, "and I believe we shall succeed. We have given our arms plenty of exercise since we left Quebec. It is time our legs got their share. Come on, I am ready."

The other two needed no further urging. Pierre started to lead off toward the eastern forest edge, when François stopped him.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To head off that scoundrel, of course. Am I not taking the right direction?"

"Yes, and leaving a trail that the redskins will pick up ten minutes after they get out. For shame! Have you forgotten all your instructions? Follow me."

With these words François stepped into the water to his knees and proceeded to wade down stream, keeping close to the shore. After a half-hour of this laborious work, he pulled himself up the bank and entered the woods, the others following close at his heels.

"They may find our trail some time, but it will take them hours now, when it would have been a case of minutes if we had followed Pierre's first impulse," he remarked as they stopped a moment to squeeze the water out of their leggings.

When this had been accomplished and a brief rest enjoyed, the real land journey was begun. Off they swung at a jog trot, François leading. He seemed to have borrowed a cat's eyes for the occasion, for he avoided all obstacles

that stood in their way as though it had been bright noonday instead of pitch-dark night. The two brothers, whose vision was less skilled for this sort of work, kept close behind. Thus did they fare onward without stopping, oblivious of cold or dampness, their skin glowing with the sustained exertion and their limbs moving in a monotonous rhythm. When the first gray of morning suffused itself through the trees, they came to a tiny moss-bound brook. Here they stopped and quenched their thirst. Fortunately each had stuffed his pockets with food before leaving the cave. When a meal had been eaten, François turned to his companions.

"You are both tired," he said, "but we dare not stop long for rest. The most pressing need now is to put as great a distance as possible between ourselves and the place we have left, and in as short a time too. However, I believe we can safely count on an hour's sleep. You two curl up and I will watch."

Pierre and Jean, whose legs ached with fatigue, and whose eyes were heavy with sleep, did not delay a moment. François remained awake, and when, judging by the increasing light, the hour was up he shook his companions to sensibility, and in a few moments the party was *en route* once more. The rain had ceased shortly before dawn. As the sun glanced down through the trees, its rays set twig and tiny bud or leaf a-glistening. The fresh, damp smell of the woods mingled with the odour of a few early flowers greeted their nostrils as they jogged on. Occasionally an open space allowed them to enjoy the freshness of the air and the tingling warmth of the sun. The short rest had refreshed the younger lads wonderfully, while their step, springy as though the journey had been but begun, showed no signs of faltering, but rather urged them on with all the impetuous force and enthusiasm belonging to youth.

Several stops were made during the day, but only of short duration. Finally, at dusk, François having estimated that they had covered fully fifteen leagues, ordered a halt and, after a brief meal, told his companions that all hands could take five hours' rest. Promptly, at midnight he awoke and aroused the others, and the march began again. Instead of the cloudy weeping sky of the previous

night, they had clear heavens and a glowing moon. The aisles of the forest, in consequence, were shrouded in a faint dreamy half-light that made their rapid progress easier. At dawn they halted beside a stream. While eating, a noble buck pushed his head through the undergrowth and stood a full minute curiously observing them. Although their food supply was rather low, François warned the brothers by a gesture not to risk discovery by some roaming enemy by a shot. Suddenly their visitor seemed to realize his danger, for with a snort of fear he withdrew and was heard crashing through the woods in his mad retreat.

Sufficient powder for six shots was all that the three brothers could scrape together; so it behoved them to exercise a strict economy and sure aim. Twenty-four hours later when another dozen leagues had been traversed, it was deemed safe to replenish their larder. A lucky shot from François's gun brought down a deer, and soon they had strips of prime venison cooking over a tiny fire. A sufficient supply being thus obtained, they were able to devote all their time to either travelling or resting.

No signs of savages were seen as they proceeded; neither was any adventure met with. The strain was beginning to be felt by all, especially Jean. The brave lad did not complain, but François could see that he was very foot-sore, and suffered a good deal of pain. He therefore slowed their pace and made frequent short stops for the young boy's benefit. Pierre was grumbling; first, at the pace set by their leader, secondly, at the lack of sleep. Finally, in the middle of the afternoon of the fourth day he came out in open rebellion. Throwing himself down upon a soft bed of moss he stretched himself out wearily and announced:

"You two can run your own legs off if you wish. As for me, I am going to save mine. I hope to have further use for them some day. I'm not going to stir from this spot, even if a dozen redskins jump out from behind each tree. Some people never know when they have had enough. I do."

Jean's brow clouded and his eyes flashed, as he replied rather shortly:

"Of course you are the only one that is tired,"

François laughed instead of chiding the older brother.

"Suppose I were to tell you that we are within one hour's quick march of our destination?"

The effect on Pierre was magical. He leaped up in an instant, saying eagerly:

"In that case, I am willing to postpone my rest. Come, lead on, hasten!"

True to François' prediction, in less than an hour their eyes caught the gleam of water through the trees ahead of them, and a few moments later they stood on the banks of the St. Lawrence at a point a short distance only from the mouth of the Ottawa. Already were the afternoon shadows lengthening as the two brothers cast themselves upon the ground to rest, while François, the indefatigable, proceeded to climb a lofty tree from whose top an unobscured view up and down the river could be obtained.

"I wonder if we have reached this spot in time," remarked Jean, as he lay stretched out at full length on a soft springy bed of pine needles.

"It would be just our luck," growled Pierre, "to have missed 'The Rat' by a few hours. That red-skinned half-bred rascal seems always to get ahead of us at the last minute. Hello! look at François waving at us. I believe he sees something up the river that is of importance, judging by his haste in descending. He will break his neck if he doesn't take more care."

Both boys, eager to learn the news, were at hand to greet him when he first touched ground again.

"What is it?" they inquired in one breath.

"Had we been an hour longer on the way, we should have arrived too late," were his first words. "I caught sight of a canoe not a third of a league away, heavily laden and with only one occupant. He is coming along close to shore and will be here in ten minutes. Let us hide in yonder brushwood and watch for him."

This suggestion was speedily followed, and all three were soon stretched out in their place of concealment observing the surface of the river with eager eyes. They had not long to wait, for in five minutes' time François, whose position enabled him to see farther up the river than the rest, whispered;

"Here he comes!"

Sure enough, it was 'The Rat,' proceeding along at a leisurely rate made necessary by the size and weight of his canoe. The boys were near enough to see the expression on his face, which was one of satisfaction and assured success. A complacent smile hovered about his lips as though in fancy he were already counting over the pieces of gold received at the sale of his cargo at Montreal, only one day's journey distant. As he passed, he cast a glance toward the setting sun, then ran his eye along the neighbouring shore as though seeking a suitable camping place for the night. A few hundred yards farther on he found what he sought, and landed.

The boys looked at one another with dancing eyes and conversed in whispers.

"Do you suppose he will stay there all night, or will he attempt to press on after dark?" was Jean's eager question.

"He will probably remain," replied François, "as he has no reason to suspect that he is followed."

"I hope he stays where he is," ejaculated Pierre, fervently, "for if he moves on, it means a hard night's run for us."

"All we can do is to wait and see," said François hopefully.

While they talked, the twilight came. An odour of burning wood was wafted to their nostrils from down the river.

"He is building a fire to cook his supper," whispered Jean excitedly; "that looks as though he had no fear of interference and intended spending the night where he is."

Darkness came, and with it the drowsy twitterings of birds settling themselves for sleep. The distant quavering cry of a loon arose on the opposite side of the river, while from the woods behind them came the hoot of an owl, and all Nature passed under the influence and reign of night. The stars shone brightly, like so many signal lamps above them, causing myriad reflections to sparkle on the smooth surface of the river. The moon was slowly climbing majestically up its path, lighting the open places and casting heavy

shadows among the trees. At length François broke the long silence.

"Stay where you are," he whispered. "I am going to find out what 'The Rat' is doing, so we can lay our plans for an attack."

He glided noiselessly away, leaving the two brothers, weary yet too excited to think of sleep, to await his return. A half-hour of quiet ensued, broken only by the vague, weird voices of the night, then he reappeared.

"All goes well," he reported. "I crept within a dozen yards of the knave. He has let his fire go out and lies asleep on top of a pile of skins in the canoe, which he has pulled up part way on the shore, but not so far as to prevent his pushing off in an instant if anything occurs to alarm him. We must wait an hour longer, then advance and capture the prize he has stolen from us."

Slowly the minutes passed. At length François gave the signal to start.

"Follow me, and when we reach the spot your part will be to shove the canoe into the water and jump in. Do you seize the paddle, Pierre, and use it without stopping until we get into mid stream. I will do the rest. Sling your guns over your shoulders. They will not be needed, for he has no firearms."

The three then arose and disappeared like silent spectres in the gloom, François in the lead. They had not proceeded far when he turned and entered the river at a favourable point. Noiselessly they advanced for a score of yards, when, lying deep in shadow, they discerned the faint outlines of the canoe. Gradually they separated. At a gesture from their leader, Jean and Pierre worked their way toward the bow while François, waist deep in water, approached the stern. Cautiously they moved step by step until the birch-bark craft was within arm's length.

One step more, and they were alongside. With a quick motion François reached forward and pushed the sleeping form into the water with a splash and climbed quickly aboard, while the two brothers did their part, launching the canoe with a vigorous shove at the same moment as they jumped in. Pierre had hold of the paddle

and with a few swift strokes sent the recaptured craft far out into the moonlit river.

'The Rat,' meanwhile, awakened as he struck the cold water, swam vigorously in pursuit, but after a moment's labour realized the futility of his exertions and returned to shore muttering innumerable execrations of hate and disappointment. The boys, chuckling aloud at his discomfiture, swung their bow downstream and started through the moonlight on the last stage of their journey to Montreal.

CHAPTER XV

SHOWS HOW EVEN AN INDIAN MAY BE OUTWITTED

On through the night went the canoe, its three occupants taking hourly turns at paddling. When dawn came they landed on the southern shore and with their hatchets fashioned a couple of rude but serviceable paddles. Thus equipped they made more rapid progress when the vogage was resumed. During the forenoon the rapids were passed in safety, and a few hours later the spire of the church at Montreal was seen ahead of them. The sight of this evidence of civilization spurred on their weary muscles until they reached the landing place.

Here a strange scene met their eyes. The level strip of land bordering the river was covered with a motley collection of huts and tents and over-turned canoes. The *coureurs-de-bois* had arrived some ten days or two weeks before and after selling out their cargoes to the traders had proceeded to fill themselves full of brandy, pouring the scorching fluid down their throats until the money received for their furs was exhausted. Days and nights of riotous excess had ensued, and now they lay about in various degrees of physical exhaustion. Some were still stretched under tents or bark huts, sleeping off the effects of the last debauch. Others, farther along in their recovery, sat or reclined with aching head and empty pockets waiting disconsolately for whatever excitement might arise.

A few of this latter class recognized the lads as they strode by and raised a feeble cheer. Others crowded about them to shake hands and hear what tale of adventure they had to relate. These were got rid of by the promise to

talk with them later. With the aid of a few unemployed Indians wandering about, the bundles of skins were conveyed to the house of a trader whose name the boys had heard their father often mention. Here, after careful examination and counting of the furs, a bargain was finally struck, and a skin purse filled with gold was received in exchange. Until this was actually accomplished the boys did not breathe easily. When the purse with its precious contents was safely stowed away in one of Pierre's inside pockets, they felt a great load lifted from their shoulders, and were disposed to look about them a bit. Consequently the remainder of the afternoon was spent in strolling leisurely about the town.

Toward dusk they repaired to the spot where they had left their canoe, and accepted the hearty invitation of a group of *coureurs-de-bois* to join them at their evening meal. After this was finished they sat about a fire and answered a few of the many questions asked them regarding their journey after leaving Michilimackinac. Their replies evoked much enthusiasm and flattering speeches, and their health was often drunk by those of the circle of their admirers who had any brandy left, and who pronounced their adventures as being something short of marvellous. At length fatigue asserted itself and they begged to be allowed to seek their much-needed rest. Nothing must do but that they must sleep in one of the near-by tents, its occupant declaring good-naturedly that he would feel honoured to have it used by such heroic lads, he being glad to bunk with one of his cronies. The boys accepted this token of regard with thanks, and were soon enjoying the first care-free slumber they had had for weeks.

Gradually the neighbouring tents were filled, and in the early morning hours silence reigned along the shore, broken only by the sound of stertorous breathing from the sleeping forms. About three o'clock, while the moonbeams were still flooding the scene, and before the first gray in the east had appeared, a muffled figure glided along the water's edge. It stopped at the boys' tent and listened, then a knife flashed in the moonlight, and a long slit was made in the side. The noise did not disturb the sleepers. In fact, it is doubtful if anything short of a cannon shot would

have aroused them. The flap thus made in the tent was drawn back, disclosing the unconscious form of Pierre. The figure sheathed its knife and offered no violence, but with deft fingers proceeded to search Pierre's clothing, even to its inner recesses and pockets. His quest was successful, for a fierce look of joy flashed across his face as he withdrew his hand, which was not empty. Pierre had slept very heavily the early part of the night, but his fatigue being somewhat abated, this rough handling brought him back to consciousness, and he awoke. The intruder, realizing that his victim might understand what was happening, slashed at the cord that sustained the tent, causing it to collapse, entangling all three sleepers in its folds. The figure then took advantage of this confusion to steal rapidly away. Pierre gave a smothered cry as he strove to disentangle himself. The other boys were awake by this time, and soon all three had arisen and stood looking about them in the half light.

"What has happened?" asked Jean, a little frightened at his sudden awakening.

"A strange accident to befall the tent!" exclaimed François. "There is no wind to blow it over."

Pierre, now thoroughly awakened, felt for the precious purse. It was gone.

"Robbery!" he cried, as he told his companions of his loss. François examined the rope and found it cut.

"Some one knowing that we sold our furs yesterday has done this," he explained.

"Who could it be?" queried Jean in a low voice. "One of the *coureurs-de-bois?*"

"Perhaps," replied François, a light breaking in upon him as he examined the tent carefully. "More likely a scoundrel."

"Who do you mean?" cried the two brothers in unison.

"'The Rat.' See this long cut, just like the one we found that night at Michilimackinac? Say nothing to anyone, but keep a sharp lookout, and I'll miss my guess if we do not see his ugly face somewhere about Montreal to-day."

The tent was raised and adjusted, and the three boys sat down upon the shore and watched with lugubrious

faces the rising of the sun. After breakfast the hole was sewed up in rude fashion and the owner of the tent was told that some one had played a trick on them by cutting the rope. As such boisterous pranks were common among the *coureurs-de-bois* when gathered together, he made light of the matter and soon changed the subject.

The lads spent the morning looking in all likely quarters for traces of 'The Rat.' Into all the traders' shops they cast an eye, even going into those places where brandy seemed to be the chief article of commerce. At length, after a fruitless search, they entered a rude shanty utilized during the visit of the *coureurs-de-bois* by a crafty dealer in the fiery liquor. They sat down disconsolately on a rude bench, tired and out of humour. A moment or two later in stalked none other than 'The Rat' himself, and, calling for a bottle of brandy, threw down a jingling gold piece on the counter in payment. Before the trader could hand him the desired article, his roving glance caught sight of the boys, whereupon he picked up the coin and hastily withdrew. The lads quickly followed him into the street. There they halted with indecision.

"Nothing is to be gained by dogging his footsteps," observed François thoughtfully. "Nor if we were to report the matter to the authorities would anything come of it, for the knave knows better than to walk about with a bag of gold on his person. He realizes, no doubt, that he is liable to get drunk any moment, and while under the influence of the brandy be robbed by some other rascal, white or red."

"Besides," added Pierre, "I could not swear that it was he who attacked the tent, although I am certain in my own mind. I did not see the thief and the Governor could hardly arrest him on mere suspicion."

"Oh, dear!" wailed Jean regretfully, "to think he is busy this very minute squandering our money while we are helpless to regain it."

François smiled.

"Not quite helpless, *mon ami*," he replied, as he placed his arm affectionately on the young lad's shoulder. "Listen to a scheme that has just occurred to me and see what you think of it. 'The Rat,' as I said a moment ago,

is too crafty to carry the purseful of gold about with him and he is too distrustful by nature to hand it to anyone else to keep for him. He must, therefore, have concealed it somewhere."

"But where?" echoed Pierre.

"That's the question. Not having any permanent home in Montreal, it would be difficult for him to find a safe place in which to hide his ill-gotten wealth. It is natural to suppose, therefore, that he has secreted it somewhere outside the city."

"Finding a needle in a haystack would be easier," groaned Pierre.

"Not necessarily. We can't, of course, hope to find the spot by going out and looking for it; we must watch him. If we can do so without his knowledge, he will, sooner or later, lead us to the hiding place. He may become frightened at seeing us just now, and secure his treasure and take it to the woods. What is more likely to happen, however, is that he will hang around the places where brandy is sold until he has spent all the money he has with him, or been robbed, then seek out his hoard for more gold with which to continue his debauch. It would only arouse his suspicions for us to follow him about all day. We had much better ignore him until toward night. Then we can separate and search until one of us finds him. After he is located, all three can watch, and if he leaves the town, follow him."

This sounded like good advice and was accordingly followed. The afternoon was spent in exploring the city, chatting with the *coureurs-de-bois* by the river's edge and repairing their canoe, which the boys had placed under safe guard. As the sun began to sink, each one took a different portion of the town and proceeded to search all the places likely to contain their convivial enemy. Their labour seemed in vain for some time.

Finally, just at dusk, Jean discovered the partly intoxicated form of the Indian half-bred on a bench in a squalid shop, engaged at irregular intervals in emptying a brandy bottle whose contents had dwindled down to within an inch of the bottom during the course of the afternoon. He stood the liquor remarkably well, and had not

given the wily trader the chance he had hoped for of searching his clothes for any spare change he might have left. The older boys were quickly notified. Pierre was stationed at a point where he could easily recognize any person passing out of the front door. François in his search about the premises discovered a rear entrance. This he decided to watch in company with Jean.

"I would wager a good deal," he explained, "that the rascal will leave by the back way. In case he does, I will send Jean to notify you, Pierre, and we can then, all three, follow him."

Their forces being thus disposed, there was nothing for them to do but wait patiently. After a half-hour had elapsed, François and his companion saw the back door open, and beheld the figure of the trader, who owned the shop, emerge into the moonlight. He stood still a moment as he cast wary glances in all directions, then retreated indoors.

"'The Rat' is evidently a good customer of his, for he is aiding him to get away unobserved, if possible. He was merely looking to see if the coast was clear for him. In a moment you will see 'The Rat' himself sneak out," whispered François.

Sure enough, the words were hardly spoken when the door creaked slightly and the figure of the half-breed glided out into the night. As he started rapidly away, François followed at a safe distance, while Jean ran to get Pierre. In a few moments all thres were in pursuit, keeping as near to the rapidly moving figure as they dared. As soon as the Indian reached a street, he muffled his face so that his features could not easily be seen, slowed his gait, and assumed a drunken stagger. A number of people were passed, but inasmuch as the sight of an inebriated savage was no novelty to their eyes, they paid no attention to him. Presently the city was left behind, and the enemy resumed his natural pace. The boys held him in view, but concealed their own movements by keeping well within the shadows. Thus they proceeded for a distance of some half a league, when they were startled at seeing 'The Rat' suddenly stop, look about him as though searching for some landmark, then turn and come toward them. This move was

disconcerting, so they darted into the shade of a clump of trees and concealed themselves behind the largest trunk.

On came the half-breed until he had approached the other side of the tree behind which the lads crouched. Their first thought was that he had seen them and was about to challenge them. They held their breaths and waited. The blanketed figure, however, halted and, reaching up, appeared to take something out of a hiding place in the trunk. François decided that if he moved away without replacing the pouch, there was nothing left to do but to spring out upon him and relieve him of his stolen wealth by force.

The sound of chinking coin greeted their ears, and they realized that he was probably merely getting a fresh supply of money, and would be content to leave the balance in its place of concealment. A moment later, the pouch was replaced and the Indian began his silent return journey to town. He had hardly disappeared when the lads leaped from their hiding place. Pierre reached up and, after feeling about a bit, found a small hole such as a woodpecker would make. In it he squeezed his hand and took it out again with his fingers clasping the precious pouch.

"It is nearly all here," he exclaimed excitedly. "I can tell by the weight that he has only used a few pieces. We will not begrudge them to him, for he has certainly worked hard."

Thus rejoicing, the three retraced their steps. As they went along the main street on their way to the river edge, they were surprised to behold 'The Rat' standing immovable, full in the light of a shop window. Pierre, unable to control his exultation, walked straight up to him.

"A pleasant evening for a moonlight stroll, isn't it?" he remarked before François could stop him. "You think yourself mighty clever, do you not? but let me remind you of two things: first, there may be others more clever than you: and second, a hole in a tree is not a safe hiding place."

With these words he turned away, leaving the Indian too astonished to speak.

François reproved him sharply for his foolhardiness.

"That was an idiotic thing to do. He will run back to

the tree, find his treasure gone, and be at our heels within an hour. We are not out of the woods yet, although we should have been had it not been for your rash words. This means now that we shall have to leave to-night instead of in the morning."

"I don't care," was Pierre's defiant answer. "He can hardly do us any injury now. I simply had to triumph over him to his face. He has caused us enough trouble already."

Jean said nothing, although sympathizing with his brother's feeling, yet he realized that François' rebuke was well merited. The three accordingly hastened to take their departure. It was necessary first to purchase some food and get a couple of paddles to take the place of those improvised on the way. This necessary shopping delayed them a little, so that it was fully an hour after Pierre's hasty words before they were able to embark.

The lights of Montreal soon died away behind them as the swiftly propelled canoe passed over the moon-lit waters. The short rest the lads had enjoyed had put them in fine trim for vigorous paddling. Consequently they were able to cover the watery leagues without loss of time or feelings of exhaustion. After four hours of hard silent work, François steered toward the shore.

"We can safely land now, I think, and get a few hours' sleep," he said; "that lazy redskin will hardly be able to catch up with us alone. We must not linger too long, however; not over three hours at the most."

All of them were ready for rest. The excitement of the day, and the vigorous paddling of the past few hours made them fairly tired, and it was but a moment or two after lying down on the shore beside the canoe before they were oblivious of the beauties of the night or the possible approach of enemies. The moon sank slowly down the western slopes; the hours sped by in their course; but the sleepers still lay unconscious of either event. Just before the slowly brightening sky burst from gray to gold, a large canoe containing three stalwart redskins came into view from the direction of Montreal and dashed by the spot where the boys were encamped. So intent were the savages on hastening along, that the canoe drawn up on the shore

and the sleeping youths escaped their notice. This was partly due to the peculiar nature of the landing place chosen by François, and partly to the low-lying fog that often arose from the surface of the river toward morning, and which tended to make objects on or near the shore indistinct, except to one passing very close at hand. A few seconds, and the can · with its eager crew had passed on into the mist.

François had counted on being able to awaken at the time desired, but a deeper lethargy than usual had seized him and held him fast. When he did open his eyes and jumped up, it was broad day, the sun having been awake for two good hours. He quickly aroused his companions, and after a hurried breakfast, the voyage was resumed. A more leisurely pace was followed than the night before. Their progress was uneventful until the middle of the afternoon. At this time a surprise was met with which very nearly put an end to the career of at least one of the three. They were proceeding along close to shore enjoying a little spurt of speed, when they suddenly shot past a tiny little bay hidden from view, in the approach, by a thickly wooded point of land. Imagine the consternation of the lads when they beheld a canoe beached high, around which lolled three redskins, one of whom was instantly recognized as 'The Rat.'

The savages were as much startled by the sudden appearance of the boys as they were. 'The Rat,' however, instantly recovered his presence of mind, and quickly raising his gun took a deliberate aim. The two brothers bent to their paddles, but François, seeing the redskin's threatening move, shipped his, and seizing a gun aimed it at the party on the shore indiscriminately and pulled the trigger. The reports of the two guns sounded as one. François' cap was knocked off his head, into the water, by the enemy's bullet, but he himself was uninjured. The savages did not get off so easily, for 'The Rat' clutched his chest, let fall his gun, and fell in a heap to the ground. His companions, who by this time had seized their firearms, took hasty aim at the boys just disappearing around the point. François resumed his paddle when he saw 'The

Rat ' fall. He quickly realized the intention of the confederates and sang out to his companions :

" Duck your heads for your lives ! "

This warning was heeded, and the bullets passed harmlessly above them. Before those on shore could reload, the boys were out of gunshot and pursued their journey at top speed.

That night no landing was made, one of the lads sleeping while the other two urged on the canoe. Finally, at dawn a bend of the river was rounded, and there, far away toward the brightening east, their wearied eyes caught a glimpse of the fortress of Quebec. An hour later, they could make out the spires of the Cathedral and the convent of the Ursulines. Another hour, and they darted into the peaceful basin before the city, and with a cheer for the flag floating proudly from the Fort above them, they landed happy and safe, their journey ended.

CHAPTER XVI

DESCRIBES A GLAD HOME-COMING AND THE LAST APPEARANCE OF THE ENEMY.

Up the steep street from the Lower Town strode the three travellers. Arriving at the Château St. Louis, they stacked their guns in a convenient corner by the door, and, entering, requested an interview with the Governor. A full hour was consumed in waiting. All chafed at the delay, especially Jean.

"I wish we had gone home first," he complained. "This is the first of June. Father and Uncle Ormesson are in trouble to-day, and our place is with them."

Pierre sighed as though fully agreeing with his brother's expression. He, however, put on a brave front and answered boldly:

"For shame, Jean! You will never make a good soldier. Our duty to the King and Colony comes first, our personal affairs second. It is only right that we should march to our superior's headquarters and report immediately upon our arrival."

François raised a warning finger.

"Hush!" he said in a low tone. "Whoever it is that has been interviewing the Governor for the past hour, he is leaving now."

The knob of the door of the inner room turned and presently an officer passed out hurriedly. The boys were then summoned to enter. They found Frontenac busily engaged at his desk with a pile of papers. In a few seconds, he looked up at the lads standing before him and recognized them with a start of surprise. François saluted, and stepping forward a pace said:

"Your Excellency, we have returned within the hour

and beg leave to report that we found the Ottawa practically clear of Indians."

Pierre saluted in turn as he stepped alongside the first speaker.

"We would also state to your Excellency that the fur fleet came through to Montreal without mishap."

Jean advanced briskly until in line with his companions, at the same time raising his hand to his head.

"On the way back we captured a score of redskins and left them bottled up in a cave for safe-keeping. We should have brought them to your Excellency to serve as hostages in your dealings with the Iroquois had we not been so greatly outnumbered."

The Governor listened to each speaker in a state bordering on stupefaction. As the boys awaited his greeting, they were alarmed to observe his face turn crimson, then purple, and the veins in his forehead stand out in bold relief. Accompanying these alarming symptoms was a quivering of his whole burly frame, and a gasping and choking, as though he could not get his breath. Jean, frightened at the sight, was about to run for assistance, when he saw that the great man was indulging in a fit of titanic laughter. A moment later, and the explosive stage was reached, and he burst forth into a sonorous peal of merriment that fairly shook the roof.

"*Ma foi!*" he managed finally to ejaculate, "mine eyes do not deceive me, then, and I really see my gallant scouts back safe and sound!" Another gale of laughter ensued. He then continued, as though exhibiting the lads to an unseen audience:

"Behold the three youths who dared to face the dangers that turned a small army back; who alone and unaided carried out the purposes of the expedition; who enabled the fur fleet to come through, and thus brought relief to a colony well-nigh bankrupt; and not content with these valorous deeds, they obtained leave of absence and betook themselves upon a private undertaking full of risk and adventures, I will warrant. Had I a hundred like you, I could dispense with all military aid, bring the savages into complete subjection, and bid defiance to all the enemies of the Colony!"

Arising, his face aglow with joy and admiration, he approached the boys and embraced each one heartily.

"Welcome back, *mes amis*, my thoughts have been often with you during your absence. I have had many misgivings as to your success and safety, but it seems no task is too hard for you to accomplish. The whole city has been ringing with your praises since the furs arrived. I shall have to look sharp and not let your fame reach the ears of the King," he added with a twinkle in his eye, "or I shall find myself removed some fine day, and three youthful governors appointed in my place."

In obedience to his request, François briefly sketched their haps and mishaps since leaving Quebec. Frontenac did not interrupt this recital, save by an occasional snort of alarm at the danger related, or a grunt of satisfaction on hearing how each peril was escaped. When the speaker described the clever stroke whereby their enemies were left imprisoned in the cave, his self-control gave way, and he laughed long and heartily. When the story was finally ended, he embraced them once more with a rough show of feeling that amounted almost to affection, and uttered words of praise that made the boys' ears tingle with delight. He even examined Jean's pockets in playful mood to see, as he explained, if he did not have a few live Indians concealed therein.

At length he resumed his natural manner.

"I must not be selfish," he exclaimed, glancing at the big clock in the corner, "and keep you here when you are eager to get home to see those who love you and anxiously await your coming. From what I hear, your arrival is very opportune, for, like many others of our traders, your father and uncle have been in deep trouble. A sight of your faces, though, will change all that. Now go, and return at this hour to-morrow, and I shall have something of interest and importance to tell you." With these meaning words, he dismissed them, and the three lads departed on their homeward way.

Meanwhile, a far different scene was being enacted within the walls of the sombre dwelling of Antoine Bordeleau, the boys' father. A sleepless night had been passed by him and Jacques Ormesson. The same sun that, peeping

above the horizon, had beheld the three adventurers paddling toward Quebec, had found the two men lying open-eyed and careworn in their beds. Their late breakfast was indeed a gloomy meal, and eaten in silence. After the table had been cleared, they flung themselves listlessly into two great chairs. At length the father of the boys roused himself, and turning to his companion, said:

"Well, *mon ami*, the hour of doom is about to strike. We have struggled and hoped and prayed for relief, but it seems that is to be denied us. At noon René Poucard will arrive, demand his money, and, that not being forthcoming, take possession and force us to depart."

"True," replied Ormesson, as he strove to appear cheerful, "but like brave men we will meet adversity without grieving, and go forth, beggars, to be sure, but filled with the firm purpose of persevering, and in the end achieving success. The blow would be bearable, had we our boys with us," he concluded, his voice breaking in spite of his efforts.

"Ah! were they but here," replied the other with deep feeling, "we should have strength and courage to meet any calamity the present might bring to us, and face the unknown future with hope and determination. Did we but know of their safety even, we could await their later arrival with patience."

"I had counted on the successful issue of their attempt to find the furs and their return in time to avert this blow; but I fear that they have failed. We know the date when they arrived at Michilimackinac. They have had time in plenty to have found the skins and returned ere now."

An hour of moody quiet followed, the two figures sitting silent and still as the carving upon the chairs. Ormesson glanced at the clock. It was a quarter to twelve. He arose and looked out of the window.

"Had I not better go down the street and see if perchance they may not have arrived?" he asked.

The other shook his head resignedly.

"A forlorn hope, *mon ami*. It is the will of God that oppresses us and we must bow before it. A few minutes and all will be over."

A loud knocking at the street door was heard, and

presently Renè Poucard entered the room. He bowed with a deprecating air, although in his eyes there gleamed a look of triumph, as he read the despair plainly written in the countenances of the others.

"*Bon jour, messieurs,*" he exclaimed in a cheery voice. "You see, I am punctual; in fact, a little ahead of time, as it lacks yet ten minutes to the hour."

"Ten minutes will make but little difference to us," replied Antoine Bordeleau roughly. "Proceed with your legal formalities and have the matter over with."

Poucard shrugged his shoulders.

"Pardon, *messieurs*, but I do not wish to take advantage of you by even one moment. The witnesses to my formal demand for payment are just behind. We must wait for them, anyway."

Another knock, peremptory and officious, reverberated through the house, and presently two officers, the expected witnesses, appeared. They bowed rather awkwardly and stood together in one corner of the room. All eyes were directed toward the clock that showed five minutes before the noon hour. Ormesson took up his station by the window and stared morosely out. His companion sank back in his chair with an air of resignation.

The minute hand moved slowly. Four minutes to twelve! Bordeleau arose and paced nervously up and down. Renè Poucard drew forth several documents which he carefully unfolded, and laid them down upon the table near which he stood. Three minutes to twelve! The rattling of a door sounded loudly in the ears of those present. One of the officers coughed and shifted his position uneasily. Ormesson still gazing down the street gave a sudden start, and from his eyes there leaped a quick sparkle of joy.

"Our own witnesses are coming," he said dryly.

Two minutes to twelve! Poucard cleared his throat, and remarking, "They are late," picked up one of the documents and prepared to read. He motioned to the two officers to take their place beside him. They obeyed.

Bordeleau watched the proceedings listlessly. Ormesson seemed to await the final moment eagerly. One minute to twelve! Poucard began reading the

formal call for the payment of the money due to him:

"I, Renè Poucard, do hereby demand of you, Antoine Bordeleau and Jacques Ormesson, in the presence of witnesses, the payment to me of a just and legal debt, in the sum of——"

At his first words the door, which had been left ajar, swung noiselessly open, and the figure of Pierre appeared. He hesitated an instant, then, gathering from the man's words the significance of the scene being enacted before him, advanced rapidly across the floor closely followed by Jean, while François brought up the rear. On reaching Poucard, Pierre interrupted him by exclaiming:

"There is the money and more too!" and he flung the fur pouch with its chinking contents upon the table.

The old man gasped in consternation. Was his prey to elude him after all? Jean gave a smothered cry of joy that broke into a sob as he rushed into his father's outstretched arms. Ormesson stepped forward and silently embraced both Pierre and François. The former gently disengaging himself, advanced to the table where the money-lender still stood, blinking with surprise.

"Come!" he said sternly, "count your money, sign a receipt, and begone. Your room, just at present, is of far greater value than your company."

The clock in the Château boomed forth twelve strokes—noon. Ormesson, seeing the usurer still hesitate, opened the purse and poured its glittering contents on to the table and proceeded to count the pile. When he had reached a sum sufficient to discharge the debt, he pushed the coins across to the miser, and swept the balance, amounting to fully one-third of the whole, back into the purse. The old man at sight of the gold in front of him roused himself from his lethargy, and after careful examination, to see that the amount was correct, pocketed the money with a sigh of disappointment at being thus baulked in his scheme and, summoning the two witnesses to attest his signature, handed the receipt to Ormesson with a bow. Then turning to the boys he spoke with a flattering air:

"These, I presume, are the young gentlemen whose arrival has been long expected. They are noble youths, certainly, worthy sons of so fine a *gentilhomme*, their

father." Then continuing, as he backed slowly toward the door rubbing his hands and smiling: "I am happy to have been able so serve you, gentlemen, and am truly rejoiced that I have been spared the necessity of insisting upon my legal rights in the matter, a procedure that would have been distasteful on my part, and one involving you in considerable inconvenience. Should you again need my assistance at any future time, do not hesitate to call upon me; I shall always be at your service. Good morning!" With a last bow he disappeared through the doorway, closely followed by the two officers.

A sigh of relief arose from all at his departure. Ormesson, who had with difficulty restrained himself during the man's farewell words, gave a snort of disgust.

"Faugh!" he exclaimed, as he threw open a window, "Let us breathe some fresh air instead of that which has been polluted by that beast's presence. Thank fortune, we have done with him! Never again shall we get into his clutches." Then putting one arm affectionately about Jean, who stood trembling with joy and feasting his eyes first on his father and then on his uncle, and drawing Pierre toward him with the other, he continued:

"It has been like the fable of the lion entangled in the net and liberated by the mouse. We were captive and helpless in the legal web cast around us by the grasping usurer and you have been the little mice, you three boys, who have gnawed us free. It is not always the strong and mighty in this world who accomplish large results. You arrived just in the nick of time. I caught sight of you hurrying along, as I stood despondently looking out of yonder window, and I knew that we were saved, that *Le bon Dieu* had not deserted us in our extremity."

The worthy trader hugged the brothers tightly in the excess of his emotion, at the same time casting a grateful look at François.

The midday meal was a merry one, as the reunited family, which included François in its atmosphere of affection, gathered once more about the great table. The dinner was necessarily prolonged, as the older men stopped between bites to ask numerous questions, which the boys, in turn, ceased eating, in order to answer. At length every-

thing was cleared away, and all five seated themselves comfortably in a semicircle, while the boys, beginning with Pierre, gave a detailed, consecutive account of all that had happened since they last met. When the elder brother grew tired, Jean took up the thread of the narrative, and finally François in his turn completed their adventurous tale. Their two listeners sat silent in rapt attention. When a point was reached in the boys' story where their situation was fraught with dangers, their breathing quickened and an anxious look overcast their faces. When the designs of the enemy were frustrated, or a peril was successfully avoided, their features relaxed and a smile of joy and gratification appeared. At times Antoine Bordeleau drew Jean to him and held him tight in a loving embrace, while Ormesson evinced his enjoyment and the excitement under which he laboured by cracking his finger-joints in an alarming manner. Finally, when the bottling up of the Indians in the cave was related, he could contain himself no longer, but bursting forth into a loud guffaw lay back in his chair and laughed until his sides ached and the tears coursed down his cheeks. The father of the boys was no less amused, although he displayed his merriment in a more quiet way. The much-worn copy of the mysterious map was produced and its markings carefully followed as the story progressed. Each of the young heroes received his share of praise at the hands of the older men: François for his practical counsel and faithfulness, Pierre for his warm-hearted, impulsive bravery, and Jean for his clever guesses and unselfish courage. These words of commendation, coming from those they loved, were sweeter to the hearts of the lads than the heartily expressed approval of the Governor had been.

While they thus conversed, the afternoon wore away and the shadows of night fell. Still the five sat shut in from the outside world unmindful of the passage of time while thus engaged in happy fellowship. When night had come in earnest, a servant brought in lights and disappeared without interrupting their thoughts or flow of conversation. They were finally aroused by a startled exclamation of Ormesson, who sprang from his chair and pointed to a shadowy human form standing near the half-opened door.

The figure, finding itself discovered, advanced a couple of paces into the light, revealing the well-known features of 'The Rat.' This sight brought all of them to their feet in wonder and alarm, the boys feeling instinctively at their belts for their hunting knives, the only weapons within reach.

The half-breed saw this motion, and raised his arm in a graceful movement of protest.

"Have no fear," he said, and his voice, although deep and guttural in tone, sounded faint and weak. "'The Rat' comes to you now in peace. He has buried the hatchet and only wishes to say farewell—forever." At this last word his face contracted as though in mortal pain, and he wavered unsteadily on his feet. Recovering himself with an effort, he continued while his glance was directed toward the two younger lads:

"We have struggled with one another and you have won. I tried to prevent you from taking what was mine by right, although not according to white men's law. The furs we both sought were given me by my father, your uncle, before he died." A look of pride flashed from his eyes as he thus claimed kinship with them. "We have been enemies, but I have not sought to harm you. I could have killed you a dozen times, but I would not because part of the same blood that flows through your veins flows through mine. I hated you because I knew you despised the outcast Indian, and would gladly have seen you die at the hands of my companions, but you were safe from mine. As for you," here he directed a malignant look toward François, "I felt differently. I tried to kill you, but missed my aim. Yours was better." At this he threw open his blanket, revealing an ugly looking wound in his chest, at the same moment staggering as though from weakness.

Jean uttered a low cry of pity, and pouring some brandy hastily into a glass hastened to him. 'The Rat' gulped its contents down eagerly.

"The fire water warms my body, but your kindness to the poor Indian warms his heart. I thank you." Returning the empty glass, he rearranged his blanket. "Before another sun rises, I shall be on my way to join my

father in the happy hunting grounds. I have come to ask one favour; bury me beside him. He had me baptized when I was a papoose; the black gowns will not forbid it."

That was all. One glance, in which the look of pride was softened by some tenderer feeling, as his eyes fell upon Jean's troubled face, a dignified gesture of farewell, and he was gone. It was fully a minute before any one recovered from the surprise that held them spellbound sufficiently to act. Then all three boys hastened out, but soon returned without having discovered any traces of their visitor. Next morning, Ormesson, in obedience to a sudden impulse, hurried to the grave of Captain Louis Bordeleau and there found the outstretched, lifeless form of the hapless 'Rat.'

CHAPTER XVII

A CONVIVIAL CHAPTER DEVOTED TO REWARDS AND HAPPINESS

A MESSAGE from the Governor was received during breakfast saying that news of the approach of a ship from France had reached him, and requesting that the lads postpone their visit to the Château until the next day. This left the boys free to do as they pleased. While finishing their meal the sound of a signal gun from the Fort told of the arrival of the expected vessel. They accordingly joined the crowd at the water's edge, and finding their canoe safe were soon paddling toward midstream. A swarm of other canoes had preceded them, whose owners were bent upon gaining liberal fees for conveying passengers and goods ashore. As the boys circled about leisurely surveying the busy scene, they passed beneath the stern of the vessel and for the first time learned its name. The two brothers gave a simultaneous cry as they recognized it as the same ship in which they themselves had arrived two years before. They drew nearer, and finding an unoccupied space at the landing stage, they made fast their canoe and hastened aboard. The first person they met was one of the officers, who instantly remembered them and gave them a hearty welcome. After a short conversation with him, they spent the remainder of the forenoon roaming about the vessel, showing François the tiny quarters they had once occupied, and explaining many things that were strange to him, for this was the first time he had ever set foot upon a real ocean-going ship.

They returned home for dinner and found their father and Ormesson greatly excited over a letter just received

from Paris. It was an order from a noted firm for a certain number of furs to be shipped each year, the profits therefrom being sufficiently large to insure them a very comfortable income, much larger than they had ever enjoyed before. While engaged in discussing their great good fortune, a messenger arrived from the Governor inviting them all, including the three lads, to be present at a dinner he proposed giving at the Château that evening in honour of the arrival of the King's ship. This delighted them all very much, and the afternoon was spent in preparing the best clothes they possessed in anticipation of the event.

At the proper hour they repaired to the Château, which they found ablaze with lights, the air humming with the voices of many guests. All the prominent people of Quebec were there : the Intendant, the officers of the garrison, resplendent in their gay uniforms, many of the leading traders with their wives, while even the good Bishop himself deigned to grace the festive occasion with his presence. After paying their respects to the Governor, they conversed with various acquaintances, the boys hearing with reddened cheeks many compliments upon their recent success. At length all were summoned to the largest room in the Château, which had been turned into a dining hall. Here the boys found, much to their surprise, that seats had been assigned to them near the head of the table, close to those of the Governor and other dignitaries. Plenty of good wholesome food was provided, prepared in a savoury manner, for Frontenac, among his many pleasing weaknesses, had a fondness for good cooking. Wine was liberally supplied to those who preferred it, but the lads were provided with some excellent Norman cider. As the meal drew near its close, many toasts were drunk and speeches of welcome and appreciation exchaged.

Finally the Governor arose once more, and amid a respectful silence said :

" Many famous names have passed our lips this night, *mes amis*, and many valorous deeds recounted performed in our beloved France ; but we have among us those whose actions prove that feats of prowess are not limited to the soil of the Old World, but flourish as well in the more

rugged atmosphere of the New. The welfare of the entire Colony has been safeguarded, and many of us here present have been saved from severe financial loss, if not actual bankruptcy, by the heroic endeavours of three of our youngest guests. Their accomplishments is already known to you, and it is but right that such worthy efforts should have due recognition." Here the great man paused a moment. All eyes were turned upon the three lads, and a great clapping of hands ensued, the ladies present waving their handkerchiefs vigorously. François squirmed uneasily in his chair at being thus brought into public notice. Pierre, striving at first to look unconcerned, failed utterly, and kept his eyes glued to his plate. Jean, all a-tremble with excitement, also dropped his head, but managed to cast a side-long glance at his father and uncle, whose smiling faces appeared near the lower end of the table. The Governor continued :

" In order to show their appreciation of the manly spirit displayed and the risks run by our youthful friends, a number of those most directly benefited by the arrival of this season's stock of furs have made up a purse containing a hundred louis and deputed me to present it." Here he drew from his capacious pocket a neatly-embroidered purse, and leaning over dropped it lightly upon the table in front of the astonished boys. A huge volume of applause broke from the assembled guests. Frontenac made an entreating gesture and silence ensued. " But there is yet lacking some official token of appreciation. After consultation with Monsieur l'Intendant and some of my officers, I have decided to organize a company of scouts consisting of about a score of men, to be known as 'The Little Regiment,' under the command and supervision of the following officers : Captain François Ledun, Lieutenant Pierre Bordeleau, Sub-Lieutenant Jean Bordeleau. The commissions have been duly signed, and I hereby deliver them." With these words the Governor drew forth the documents and had them passed to the boys, who sat stunned with surprise and happiness. He then sat down amid the deafening plaudits of his guests, who thoroughly enjoyed the embarrassment of the lads.

At this juncture the Intendant arose, and holding hit glass aloft cried :

"A health to 'The Little Regiment,' and its gallant officers," a toast that was responded to by all with enthusiasm. When the confusion subsided, the boys found all eyes directed on them expectantly, as though awaiting some response. Jean thereupon nudged Pierre and Pierre nudged François. The latter, seeing there was no help for it, got to his feet somehow, bowed to the Governor and the rest of the assembly, and managing to stammer forth : "Your Excellency, friends, I thank you," slid back into his seat completely overcome.

Pierre then stood up, and after bowing, cleared his throat and said :

"I cannot make a speech, I can only say that all this fuss is about a very small matter. We did but do what every true soldier of France is bound to do—his duty."

Jean found when he arose that something was the matter with his knees, they knocked against each other in such an alarming manner. His mind, too, was all awhirl, he had no thoughts to express, nor words to utter them with. A sudden inspiration, however, seized him, so he raised his half-emptied glass, his eyes sparkling and a bright smile lighting up his face, and exclaimed in a clear ringing voice :

"To His Gracious Majesty, the King, and our beloved Colony!" At these patriotic words every man sprang to his feet with a cheer, and every glass clinked merrily with its neighbour as the toast was drunk. Thus ended the first Governor's dinner the boys had ever attended.

Promptly at the appointed hour next day the three friends found themselves in Frontenac's private room at the Château. The great man received them most graciously.

"Good morning, Captain Ledun and Lieutenants Bordeleau!" he exclaimed with a cordial smile and a merry twinkle in his eye, as he perceived the lads' confusion on being addressed by their new titles. "I trust that last night's dissipation did not prevent you from sleeping well."

Pierre and the others murmured their acknowledgments of this kindly greeting. Motioning them to be seated, the

Governor next inquired of Jean how his father and uncle fared. The boy then related the scene that had transpired on their arrival home. Frontenac was greatly amused on thus learning of the money lender's discomfiture, and chuckled and laughed to his heart's content. At length his merriment subsided, his face sobered, and he turned to more serious matters.

"The main object in having you come at this hour was originally to inform you of your appointments and hand over to you your commissions. All that, however, was done last night. I will say, though, that my idea of having a well-trained body of scouts is a serious one. The qualities you have displayed, and the success hitherto met with led me to select you as the officers of this important company, nicknamed by me 'The Little Regiment.' I wish you to pick out the men yourselves at once and devote all your time to training them, as I expect to call upon you and your men for active service at no distant date. I am confident that under your supervision they will quickly develop into as brave and efficient an organization as the members of the recent expedition showed themselves to be cowardly and weak. I shall stand as ready to reward in the one case as I am now about to punish in the other."

As the speaker paused, Jean asked with a troubled face:

"Pardon me, Your Excellency, but what do you intend doing to those who refused to advance? I hope you will not be too severe."

The Governor grew stern at these words and his lips closed in a determined manner.

"I have cut off all special privileges for one year and increased the garrison duty of every private soldier who turned back, besides doubling their drills and reducing their pay. The ringleaders, to the number of twenty, I have had placed in chains and closely confined since their return, and shall ship them back as prisoners in this vessel that arrived yesterday, with a request to His Majesty that he send me men in the future, not cowards."

Jean, unabashed at these harsh words, persisted in questioning.

"What will happen to them when they reach France? Will they not be disgraced forever?"

A grim smile played about the features of Frontenac as he replied :

" Disgraced ? *Certainement !* What would you have ? If the King happens to be in a good humour, he may be content to grant them a dishonourable discharge from the service. If he is vexed, as I doubt not he will be, he will probably imprison them, perchance send them to the galleys —an awful fate, but one they richly deserve."

At these words Jean gave a cry of alarm, and dropping on one knee he seized Frontenac's hand.

" Oh, Your Excellency, be merciful, I implore you ! " he pleaded. " They are all brave soldiers at heart, every one of them, and would have done their duty had it not been for the wild tales poured into their ears by the wicked *coureurs-de-bois*. Their lives will be ruined. Some of them are married. Have pity on their innocent wives and children and spare them this terrible disgrace." The boy's frame quivered with emotion, while tears stood in his eyes. Gulping down a sob, he continued : " Your Excellency has been pleased to praise our efforts and has showered us with rewards, although none were asked for or expected. If you have really considered what we have done as worthy of compensation, do not, I pray you, refuse the request I now make. Release these men. Save them from dishonour. Give them one more chance of proving that they are indeed true soldiers of France. Give them to us as members of ' The Little Regiment.' We will train them and guarantee to you that all their future actions will be praiseworthy and without blame."

At first the Governor listened unmoved. As the boy's passionate appeal proceeded, his features softened. When he ended he arose and forcing Jean to stand embraced him heartily but silently, as a wave of emotion swept over him. Finally, holding the boy at arm's length, he surveyed him with pride and admiration as he exclaimed :

" Would that *Le bon Dieu* had given me such a son ! Your courage is tempered with tenderness. Your ambition is excelled by your unselfishness. I cannot withstand your pleading. Your request is granted."

That night the bright stars looked down upon the slumbering city with their accustomed brilliancy. Many of the

inhabitants enjoyed the healthy sleep following a day of honest toil. In the Château, the Governor, possessed of a mind at peace with all the world and a consciousness of having dealt mercifully, sat far into the night working at his desk by candlelight over official papers. Within their gloomy house Antoine Bordeleau and the worthy Ormesson talked and planned until day concerning the new and happy future that had suddenly brightened for them, while overhead, lost in youthful slumber, lay the three brave lads dreaming of their coming adventures in command of "The Little Regiment."

THE END.

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